It's never too early for a child to start gardening. Gardening is a great activity that parents and grandparents can do with children that everyone can enjoy. It provides a multitude of benefits to all involved, along with creating and promoting a lifelong skill.

If approached the right way, gardening can prove to be a rewarding, fun experience for youth, rather than a chore. It’s a great activity that gets children outside and involved in an educational experience. Studies have shown that children who garden have an increase in self-esteem, build positive attitudes, and gain the sense of teamwork when working with others.

Responsibility, patience, and pride are also leaned as a result from gardening. Children learn the importance of plants. Give the sole responsibility of watering and fertilizing the plants to the child. This will teach them that plants need water, food, and nurturing in order to grow, just as they do. Children will be exited when the flowers bloom and vegetables begin grow on their plants. They will feel proud knowing that they were the ones who were responsible for growing the flowers for the bouquet or the vegetables for the salad.

Encourage creativity when gardening with children. Allow the children to decide the location of the garden and what to grow in the garden. Make sure the children have the right tools with the right fit. Most children need smaller, lighter tools, which will allow them to work more efficiently and more comfortably.

Starting plants by seed is a good learning experience for children. It will help them understand the biology of plants and more about the environment. Remind the children when they eat the produce that they have grown, that the process started from a seed and that the seeds can be found again in the vegetables. The plant completes a circle, ensuring its survival.

For small children, use larger seeds that they can handle easily, such as corn, bean, or sunflower seeds. You may also want to plant some more mature vegetable plants that are found at the local garden center, so the children can get a preview of what their seeds will turn into.

Waiting for a seed to grow into a plant and then produce vegetables could be a long process in the life of a child, so do extra gardening activities to keep their interest. Have the children design their own row markers for the vegetables or build a scarecrow. Show them the importance of weeding the garden. Weeds are the plants’ competitors. They steal the water and nutrients from the plant, so it is important that they are taken out.

It is not necessary to have a plot of land for a garden. Gardening can be done anywhere in pots and containers. Just make sure that there is enough sun for the plants. A few pots with some flowers and vegetables can show the children just how much fun and how important gardening is to us and our environment.

Gardening is a great educational activity for youth of any age. It teaches them about science and the environment, as well as responsibility and self-sufficiency. It’s a great sight to see a child’s excitement when they spot the first vegetable growing in their garden.

If you have a youth in third grade through eighth grade that has a strong interest in gardening or science, the Junior Master Gardener program, being held over the week of spring break, would be a great opportunity for them to extend their knowledge and have a lot of fun.

The Junior Master Gardener program is an international youth gardening program of the University Cooperative Extension network. JMG engages children in novel, "hands-on" group and individual learning experiences that provide a love of gardening, develop an appreciation for the environment, and
cultivate the mind.

JMG also inspires youths to be of service to others through service learning and leadership development projects and rewards them with certification and recognition.

Youth can explore their world through meaningful horticulture and environmental science activities that encourage leadership development, personal pride, responsibility and community involvement. The program incorporates service learning and volunteerism, which enables youth to make a positive contribution to their community.

The JMG Program will be held at the Osceola County Extension Building in the new Osceola Heritage Park complex from March 17 - 21 (9am - 3pm), with an orientation meeting on Wednesday, March 12 at 3pm until 5pm. Call (321) 697-3000 for more information.

Want a landscape that looks beautiful, but requires little input? Learn how to create a "Florida Friendly Yard". Come to the class on January 30th at 7pm. Please call to register.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: January 26th, 2003