

Gardening with Children

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With spring break just around the corner, it is time to start thinking about activities to do with your children. Have you ever considered a gardening activity? 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 that 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 learned 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 nurture in order to grow, just as they do. Children will be excited when the flowers bloom and vegetables begin to 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. They may even be more willing to eat their vegetables, if they are ones that they grew in their own garden!

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.

For a quick harvest, plant radishes. Radishes grow from seed to an edible product in as little as 20-30 days. If your child does not like radishes, plant them anyway. A child is more likely to try a strange or new vegetable if it is one that they grew in their own garden.

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. Contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners for a free Vegetable Planting Calendar and Florida Gardening Guide publication to get your vegetable garden started.

For more information on vegetable gardening and for answers to other gardening or landscaping questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your call Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also stop by our free Plant Clinic during those hours. We are located at Osceola Heritage Park in the Extension Services building. Email questions to the Master Gardeners at oscmg@osceola.org.