HORTICULTURE COLUMN

SUMMER FUN FOR KIDS

Kids need activity during these hot summer days. Idle hands and minds benefit from positive experiences.

Many of our youth have never had an opportunity to plant a seed or see how plants grow. Plants need nurturing and so do kids. Try some fun and educational planting projects while you and the youth can spend some time together. The plants won’t be the only thing growing.

There are many sources for ideas for gardening with kids. Check out Tom MacCubbin’s Florida Home Grown 2: The Edible Landscape. We also have some youth gardening ideas on our Osceola County Extension web site at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/.

Show a child how seeds grow by creating a mini garden in a glass, a jar or a clear plastic cup. Soak a few bean seeds in a cup of water for an hour or so. Dried beans or packaged garden seeds work well. Fold a sheet of paper towel so it is only as deep as the cup, jar or glass. Roll it and place it in the container. Gently place the seeds between the paper towel and the clear container wall so you can watch the seeds sprout. Let the child draw a picture of what happens each day or take pictures of the stages. If the pictures are on separate sheets of paper, the child can later play a game of putting the pictures in order by the correct sequence. Read the story of Jack and the Bean Stalk for a touch of fantasy.

A fun variation of this project is to grow edible sprouts. Most grocery stores and health food stores sell "sprout seeds". Be sure you get seeds specifically for this purpose since common garden seeds may be treated with chemicals. Try mung bean, alfalfa, or lentils. Radish sprouts are spicy (I say sparky) if you want something different.

Soak a small amount of seeds in a large clear jar over night. Try a tablespoon first since they expand in volume as they grow. Punch holes in the jar lid to let in air. In the morning, rinse the seeds and drain off water. I let mine sit at an angle in the dish drainer for a few minutes. Turn the jar on its side then roll or shake the jar to spread the seeds out along the side. Twice a day, rinse the seeds and gently shake the jar to separate the seeds so they have room to grow. The jar should not be in direct sunlight since the seedlings could get too hot and die. You should have edible size sprouts, about 3 - 4" long in only 3 - 4 days. When they are big enough to eat, you can add them to a salad or put them on a sandwich for an added crunch. Store unused sprouts in the refrigerator so they don’t spoil. You may want to rinse them every few days to keep the roots fresh and moist.

Another easy project to get you started is to plant a pineapple top. Most grocery stores will give you the tops from fresh pineapples. Simply pull off any fruit flesh so it doesn’t sour and let the top dry out for a day or two. Pull off a few of the lower leaves and poke the end an inch or so deep into a 6 or 8 inch pot of vermiculite or potting soil. Water periodically to moisten the soil but don’t over water. Within a few weeks you should notice new leaves developing. Put it in filtered sun to start then move it to full sun once it is rooted. You can transplant it into a 3 to 5 gallon size container or plant it in the landscape. Fruit develop in about 2 years in the center of the pineapple plant. While this is a long-term project, the sweet harvest is worth the wait.

Sweet potatoes grow as vines and make great indoor plants for bright rooms or patios. There are several ways to start plants from sweet potatoes. Lay a sweet potato on a tray until it begins to sprout shoots. Notice that they only grow on one end of the potato. Once you can see which end they are sprouting from, place the potato in a jar or glass of water with the sprouting end up. You will soon notice roots developing from the bottom part of the potato. Grow the plant indoors as a houseplant or plant it outside. As a
houseplant, provide a trellis for the vines or let them drape over the edge of a table.

You can also plant the potato in a pot of soil. They will produce edible roots in the soil in about 4 months. If you plant one in the yard, you will have them for years since they spread and produce more potatoes where the stems touch the ground. Plan to keep them in a confined area.

You can also start new plants by cutting sections of the stem or breaking off new shoots and planting them an inch or so into the soil. Commercial growers call these cuttings slips and commonly start new fields using this method.

We have a variety of plant science activities for youth through our 4-H program. Contact Joy Borgman at (321) 697-3000 for information you can use at home or for school classes.

Youth grow and develop along with plants if you get them involved in plant projects now.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: June 22nd, 2000