PLANT LIFE COLUMN

SUMMER FUN

School's out soon and teachers and students are wound tight in anticipation of summer vacation. No classes, no homework and lots of time can quickly turn to boredom or mischief if kids are not involved in wholesome, fun and safe activities. Try some of these activities with the kids in your life.

It's fun to play in the mud so plan some dirty time. Kids don't need much of an excuse to get dirty so why not let them plant seeds, repot plants, clean out pots or start cuttings. When they are finished, let them play with bubble soap and hose them down before coming inside.

Pumpkin seeds planted now should produce pumpkins for Halloween carving. Plant several seeds in a mound of soil amended with compost or peat moss. Be sure there is room to spread since pumpkins grow on long vines. Train vines on an old ladder or piece of fence if you have a small yard with limited space.

Pole bean forts are fun to build and create shade in sunny areas. Tie a bundle of bamboo poles together at the top and spread them into a circular shape at the bottom. Space the poles to leave an opening so children can go inside and play. Plant a pole bean seed at the base of each pole.

Pre-made lattice panels can be lashed together with string or plastic cable ties to create a play house. Plant seeds approximately 4 inches apart along the perimeter of the structure, leaving a gap for a doorway.

Have a bean stalk contest and see how tall the vine will grow. Let the children get creative and see what they can find for the vines to grow up on. In the old days, we had a television antenna. Perhaps you could attach a string to the eave of the house on the south or west side and let the vines grow up that.

Beans and most other vegetables need at least 6 hours of full sun to grow well. Follow package directions and sprinkle a little granular fertilizer every 3 weeks or water weekly with liquid fertilizer solution.

Get your seeds soon for any summer projects because suppliers will be removing this year's seeds and racks won't be restocked until late summer for fall and winter planting with 2002 seeds. They do this to protect the consumer and make sure there are fresh seeds in stock since some have a limited shelf life.

Add color to your garden with sunflowers. There are so many types available now and seeds are easily available from garden centers. It is exciting to see how big they will grow or how many flowers they produce. Then guess how many seeds one flower head can produce.

Plant peanut seeds for a fall harvest treat. Peanuts grow as a groundcover plant with small pea type yellow flowers. Once the blooms have been pollinated, they grow into the ground. The peanut, a fruit, is formed at the end of the flower stem underground. If you want to watch the peanuts develop, crack open a green, unroasted, peanut and plant the seeds in the lid of a clear plastic cake box. Be sure to poke some holes in the box so water can drain out. You will be able to see the peanuts develop along the edge of the box.

Build a bird house or feeder. Use a kit or get our construction plans if you want to start from scratch. Make a simple feeder from a juice or milk jugs. Make a hole and insert a stick through the jug so it extends out on both sides then cut a hole the size of dime above the stick, fill with seeds and hang them from a tree limb. Pine cones smeared with peanut butter and rolled in bird seed are also easy projects.

For a rainy day activity, recycle old seed catalogs or magazines into place mats or poster art. Scissors, paper and glue sticks are all that is needed. Make place mats by laminating the artwork or covering it with clear contact paper.

The Osceola Master Gardeners and our 4-H youth program have a variety of activities for kids. The new
Junior Master Gardener program is starting soon. Contact us if you would like more information. There is a leader guide for adult or teen supervisors and a great manual for the youth participant. Fun activities make this program ideal for home school, scouts, summer camp or science class. We also have a book of Plant Crafts for sale at the Plant Clinic.

Master Gardener volunteers are at the Osceola County Extension Office to help answer your plant care questions on Mondays to Fridays from 10 a.m until 2 p.m. Call them at (321) 697-3000. You can reach them at the web site at epabon5@ufl.edu. More information is on the web at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu.

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