



THE JOY OF DIRT

Gardening Connects Kids to Nature

by Barbara Pleasant

Children benefit from a close connection with nature, and there's no better place to learn about plants and soil than a garden. Families don't need lots of space, as even a small collection of potted plants holds fascination for youngsters. The first step is to understand a garden as seen by a child that may be more interested in creative play than in making things grow.

Whitney Cohen, education director at Life Lab, a nonprofit that promotes garden-based education in Santa Cruz, California, thinks kids benefit most from what she calls "dirt time"—spent outdoors interacting with plants, animals, soil and everything else. "When a child plants a seed, tends it over time and ultimately pulls a carrot out of the soil and eats it, they begin to know down in their bones that food comes from plants; that healthy food is delicious; and that we are part of a vast and beautiful web of life," Cohen says.

This learning process may not match a parent's idea of a lovely garden. "Children don't make neat rows. They water leaves and flower petals rather than the roots. They accidentally step on young seedlings.

Gardening with children is messy and chaotic, but there is always learning going on beneath the surface, just out of sight," says Catherine Koons-Hubbard, nature preschool director at the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Growing nutritious vegetables like cherry tomatoes allows kids to see, touch and possibly smash a food as they get to know it, increasing the likelihood that they will eventually eat it.

Incorporate Play Spaces

"Children might rather be playing than following instructions," Koons-Hubbard counsels, but it's easy to incorporate space for free play in the garden. Depending on a child's imagination and which toys are used, a spot of diggable soil in the shade might morph into a dinosaur refuge, pony farm or secret place for fairies.

Kids are also attracted to stepping stones, which encourage hopping, stretching and even counting. Don't be surprised if kids turn some of them into a stage or a place to stack rocks or leaves.

Children love mixing soil and water together into mud. When given a bucket of

clay, soil and water, kids quickly discover they can use mud to paint, sculpt or make fantasy pies decorated with leaves, sticks or flowers.

“Playing in mud fully engages the senses, and there are studies that show it can benefit the immune system and make us happier,” says Leigh MacDonald-Rizzo, education director at the Ithaca Children’s Garden, in New York. References include the University of Bristol, UK, University of Colorado Boulder and University of California, Los Angeles.

“Mud isn’t anything, really, and that open-ended quality lends itself to joyously creative play that helps children develop a relationship with the natural world,” she says.

Top Tools for Kids

Small children notice things close to the ground, which become even more interesting when seen through a magnifying glass. Sturdy kids’ versions in bright colors are easy to find if they get misplaced outdoors.

Curious children love getting a close-up look at worms and other critters in the worm bin or compost pile, or the structures inside flowers. “But when we just let the children explore, they’ll find loads of intriguing objects we may never have thought of, like water caught on the fuzzy underside of a leaf, a sparkly rock or rough tree bark,” Cohen says.

Children love to water plants, especially during hot summer weather. Small watering cans that hold only a little water are easy for kids to handle and limit overdoing it. Water-filled spray bottles also encourage exploration while keeping kids cool.

Digging to discover what’s underground comes naturally to kids, and preschoolers do best with toy-size tools with short handles. Older kids can control child-size spades and rakes better than heavier adult tools.

Keeping Outdoor Space Safe

Remove the worry from gardening with kids by minimizing safety risks. Replace poisonous or prickly plants with vegetables, herbs or edible flowers and teach kids of all ages not to eat plants unless they have first been checked by an adult.

Insects can be both interesting and threatening, and flying insects often are attracted to bright colors. Dress kids in light, neutral colors to avoid unwanted attention from bugs. Avoid chemical fertilizers and sprays, and opt for organic solutions.

Barbara Pleasant has authored many green-thumb books including Homegrown Pantry: Selecting the Best Varieties and Planting the Perfect Amounts for What You Want to Eat Year-Round. She grows vegetables, herbs and fruits in Floyd, VA; connect at BarbaraPleasant.com.