



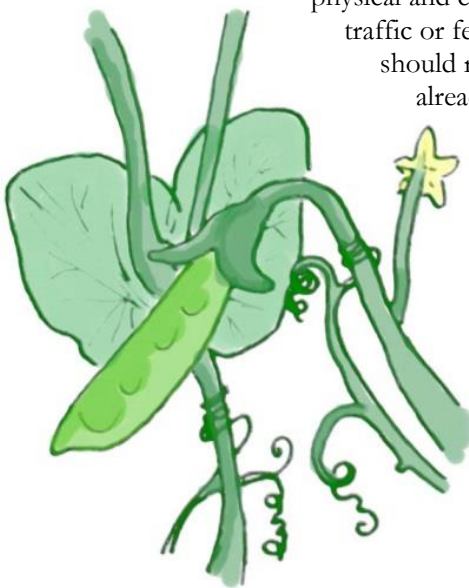
The DIRT Society Gardening with Children

Making room in your garden and schedule for a child's contribution ensures a lifetime of return benefits. Children develop deep-rooted comfort as they play in the garden; learning about life cycles, nature, nurture, symbiosis, and the actual, tangible fruits of small labors. After harvesting crops, they'll also learn to distinguish between healthy food and the other stuff; grainy, mushy, grocery store produce. Many parents and teachers have noticed that children are more likely to enjoy food when they've contributed to its preparation. Allowing them into the garden gives them the greatest possible responsibility for the outcome, and the greatest enjoyment of it, too.

A child can't be expected to tend an entire vegetable patch on their own, of course. (Most adults who lack a fundamental understanding of biology and ecology won't fare any better at first.) But, with practice and some help along the way, children's dirt-digging impulses blossom into gardening skills.

What are the benefits? It's hard to think of a single reason *not* to let children garden. By involving them you link them to their own food supply, give them freedom and personal space, encourage them to be outdoors, engage their attention with an activity that takes months to complete, and provide an invaluable education. Those are some of the more obvious perks, but there are dozens more.

Are children safe in the garden? Some precautions should be made to protect children from injury and poisoning. Discourage them from putting their fingers into their mouths, provide them with comfortable gloves and garden shoes, and wash hands together once you've finished your work. Consider, also, the benefits of giving each child their own plot. You can limit the size, fill the area with clean soil mix, and monitor the space more easily. The child's work area should be safe from physical and chemical hazards such as traffic or fertilizer. These basic steps should reduce, significantly, the already mild dangers of gardening.



How do we begin? *The younger, the better.* That is true of both the child and the plants you plan to grow. Let children start with planting seeds. Not only will they have a better understanding of growth and development, they can feel a stronger tie to the garden once it is flourishing. That said, some seed varieties are better than others. Look for seeds that sprout and mature quickly, and produce food that the young gardener will enjoy harvesting and eating. Some favorites are confectionary sunflowers, carrots, lettuces and snow peas; all of which mature rapidly and are fun to snack on.

Will they stay interested? Children follow your example. If you work and play in the garden, so will they. You can't expect all children to develop a passion for potatoes, but they will keep themselves occupied for short periods while you weed and water. It is important that you take their contribution and space seriously; allowing them to use your tools and exercise a certain amount of autonomy over their creation. You can also grow together somewhat; looking up an odd beetle you've captured or choosing seeds for the following season. What follows could be pride, frustration, worry, or curiosity... but it will rarely result in a lack of interest.

Should I help behind the scenes? Most parents are tempted to re-seed, water, weed, de-slug and tidy their children's garden. However, you limit a child's learning by performing this well-meaning magic. It's better to carefully tend your own space, and allow them to observe and imitate. Intervene when absolutely necessary, but be ready to relinquish control when their interest returns.

What happens next? Encourage them to participate during any season you choose to garden. Be understanding of off-shoot interests that may not align with yours: bug collecting, geology, growing ornamentals, flower pressing, etc. Consider excursions to urban gardens, farmer's markets, orchards, seed-swaps, or animal farms. The world of food production is enormous and varied; providing ample opportunity to draw a child's curiosity and initiate stimulating conversation.



One might argue that a child is more inclined to play in the dirt than to avoid it, so the garden is a natural playground. With a few basic accommodations and a watchful eye, adults can make the garden a safe and rewarding environment for children of any age.