

Gardening with Children

Children love to dig in the dirt. Why not turn this desire to dig into a productive and wonderful learning experience by creating a garden at your child care? A garden provides opportunities for children to explore in nature, discover where foods come from, learn about science and become responsible for growing a seed to an edible plant.

What children may learn by spending time in a garden:

- What makes plants grow – **water, air, sunshine, digging!**
- Preparing the ground – **add compost in the spring; mulch in the fall, weed often**
- Caring for living things – **be gentle, water, watch...**
- Benefits of bees, birds and worms – **birds and bees carry seeds; worms give the ground valuable nutrients.**
- How fruits, vegetables and herbs taste when freshly picked – **yummy!**
- The value of patience – **gardening is a lesson in delayed gratification.**



When children help in the garden, provide them with quality child-sized garden tools rather than breakable plastic ones or use household items such as tablespoons for digging. (Find these at the local Goodwill store!)



Also, include children in other garden activities such as raking or collecting leaves, making compost, reseeding the lawn, decorating the garden, or spreading mulch. Do art activities with items collected in the yard or on a nature walk such as [creating leaf rubbings](#), [daisy chains](#) or [collecting items to create nature collage](#).



Types of Gardens



Companion planting in a raised garden bed and with Vertical gardening of strawberries hanging on a fence.
[Home Vegetable Gardening in Washington, WSU Extension, EM057E, 2013](#)

- Designate an area of the yard as a garden space for the children
- Construct raised beds at the edge of the play area

- Use containers such as flowerpots, garden planters, window boxes, or strawberry pots, tin cans
- Start plants indoors in individual pots, cups, egg cartons, or even plastic bags early in the Spring

Planting the Garden

Soil Management:



When planning a fruit, vegetable or herb garden you may need to amend the soil with organic compost and potting soil to add nutrients and improve soil capacity to hold in nutrients, water and air. Adding 1 to 3 inches of compost helps to slowly release nutrients and hold water in the roots of the plants. Use commercial products that are clearly marked “Organic”, dig in organic compost or use biosolids that are collected from worm bins, food waste or other compost made from organic matter. For more information on how to improve the quality of your garden soil, read Organic Soil Amendments...[How Much is Enough from WSU Cooperative Extension.](#)

Where to Plant:

There are numerous ways to plant edible gardens. Most fruits and vegetables require a fair amount of sun and heat to grow to their maximum potential. But containers of tomatoes on the back deck or a box of leafy greens on the periphery of the outdoor play area will allow for some plant- growing practice.

When planting items in a garden bed, consider growing fast crops with slower growing crops to sustain interest. And provide variety. Also, once the faster growing items like radishes, spinach and lettuce are harvested there will be more space for the slow growing items...such as carrots and tomatoes.

Table 6. General rooting depths of some common vegetable crops grown in Washington (adapted from Maynard and Hochmuth 1997, 221).

Shallow-Rooting (18-36 inches)	Medium-Rooting (36-48 inches)	Deep-Rooting (48+ inches)
Broccoli	Bean, Snap	Artichoke
Brussels Sprout	Beet	Asparagus
Cabbage	Carrot	Bean, Lima
Cabbage, Chinese	Chard, Swiss	Parsnip
Cauliflower	Cucumber	Squash, Winter
Celery	Eggplant	Sweet Potato
Chicory (Endive)	Mustard	Tomato
Corn	Pea	
Garlic	Pepper	
Leek	Rutabaga	
Lettuce	Squash, Summer	
Onion	Turnip	
Parsley		
Potato		
Radish		
Spinach		

Generally, shallow rooted plants will be ready to pick before the deep rooted plants. [Home Vegetable Gardening in Washington, WSU Extension, EM057E, 2013](#)

What to Plant

Consider choosing plants that:

- Germinate quickly to maintain interest. - consider radishes, bush peas, climbing beans, spinach and cherry tomatoes.
- Are fun or colorful plants such as sunflowers, nasturtium, zinnia, or snapdragons
- Celebrate an event such as flowers for Mother's Day or pumpkins for Fall Harvest;
- Attract butterflies such as lavender, salvia, butterfly bushes
- Children can taste, such as zucchini, carrots, radishes, peas, lettuce, strawberries, or different herbs
- Include various textures as lamb's ear, hen and chicks, and the curry plant



[Climbing pole beans are easy to grow, see and pick.](#)



[Growing pumpkins in pots is quick and gratifying.](#)



Curry plants have silvery leaves and smell like the curry spice. (Edible)



Hens and Chicks is in the sedum family. It grows very fast and has waxy leaves. (Not edible but OK to touch)



Lambs ear has fuzzy leaves and long stalks of fuzzy flowers. (Not edible but OK to touch)

Make Gardening a Safe Activity

Since children may put plants in their mouths, it is important to establish a few gardening rules:

- Make sure your garden soil has not been contaminated with chemicals from industry, household paint, gasoline, pesticides, or natural occurring compounds and is well away from animal waste.
- Gardening should ALWAYS be an adult led activity. Some plants or parts of plants in the NW garden may be unsafe to eat.
- Never eat any leaves or stems unless from an herb. (The leaves of rhubarb, tomatoes, potatoes and eggplant are poisonous.)
- Never eat any item that has fallen to the ground...when picking berries, only eat what gets plucked from the stem.
- Bring all harvested items into the kitchen for washing before eating.
- Wash hands well with soap and running water after playing outside or gardening;
- Locate gardens and garden beds away from old painted structures and roadways
- Use potting soil without vermiculite as it may contain asbestos

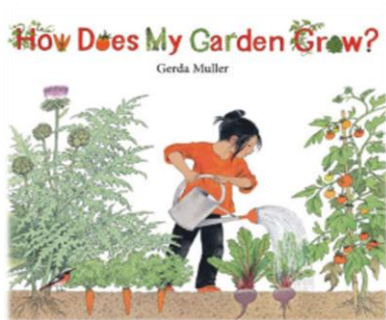


- Beware of poisonous plants you may have in your yard and keep them off limits or remove them: digitalis (fox glove) some types of sedge (euphorbia), poppies, buttercups and delphinium.
 - Check out [WSU Extension, Master Gardening brochure about Kids Safety and Poisonous Plants.](#)
 - For a more extensive explanation check out the [Poison Control illustrated list of poisonous and non-poisonous plants.](#)

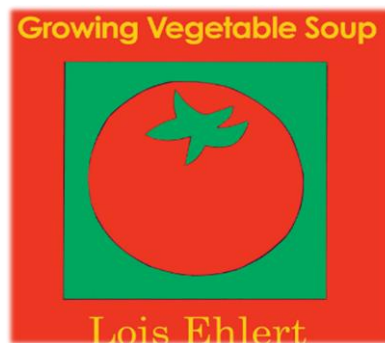
Harvesting the Plants

The biggest joy of gardening is picking a ripe, red strawberry from the stem, snapping a snow pea from the vine and plucking leaves of lettuce from the ground. Harvest time should be a special event of the day. Prepare children for harvesting by reading a book about it first. Consider picking enough lettuce and spinach to eat at lunch time, enough green beans to add to a vegetable soup, or enough strawberries for everyone to have at least one during snack. Demonstrate how to identify when a plant is ripe and how to carefully pick it and put it in the basket or bucket for washing. Allow children to help by giving them each a job to do. If possible work in groups of 3 – 4 children per adult. Model how to avoid stepping on plants in the ground which are still growing; how to hold the bean vine with one hand and pick off a single bean with another; how to pick the outer leaves of a clump of lettuce and leave the smaller ones for later and how to water the garden to keep plants thriving.

Gardening with children may seem a little messy and like a big process. Gardening with children may be the only farm to table connection a child has...one that may provide a chance to feel the earth, see a food grow from seed to soup and eat a plant not purchased from a grocery store.



Sophie lives in the city, and her vegetables come from the supermarket. Then she goes to visit her grandparents in the countryside – and soon discovers how much there is to learn about how things grow!
Gerda Muller, 2011



This classic children's book about gardening brings the garden goodies to the soup pot. It is sure to inspire children to eat their vegetables.
Lois Ehlert, 1987



Jack and many elements in nature make his garden. This book is a delightful illustration of how a garden grows.
Henry Cole, 1997

For more information and lots more ideas about gardening with children check out the [Kids Gardening: Helping Young Minds Grow website](https://www.kidsgardening.org/) .

