

Gardening with children

Whether you dig in the dirt to plant a potted seedling or just plop seeds in a hole, there's nothing like the excitement children have in seeing the wonder of new growth. This year could be your chance to experience a new aspect of gardening. It might be the start of teaching your child, not only the pleasure of seeing something they plant miraculously grow, but helping them learn lessons about the environment and giving them a worthwhile sense of enjoying the bounty of their harvest.

Here are some suggestions to consider:

Start small. Don't expect to plant a huge garden. It could become more work than you or your family can handle. Start with a package of seeds, like sunflowers, zinnias, or marigolds. These take little care and can be put in a pot or directly in the ground (after the threat of frost is over, which is typically mid- to late-May in Northwest Indiana). Or select a terra cotta pot, fill it with potting soil, and add a few flower starts from a cell pack of impatiens or petunias.

Enjoy a visit to a gardening center to inspire you and your child. Looking at the beautiful colors of flowers, the wide variety of plants, and the interesting textures of leaves will give you a sense of excitement to plant something special. One great plant that kids love is Lamb's Ears. It has soft, furry, gray leaves

that are wonderful to touch and eventually shoots up stalks of tiny purple flowers. It's best to plant it in a pot because it spreads and can become invasive to areas where you don't want it.

Make sure you know the sun or shade conditions where you'll plant. One thing you don't want to happen is for your newly planted seedling to either get scorched by the hot sun or get straggly from not enough light. For the shadier places, select from a variety of Coleus which has variegated leaves in hues of red, pink, burgundy, orange, or shades of ivory and green. These look as lovely as flowers and don't require much care. For sunnier locations, try planting a handful of Sunflower seeds. Kids love to see how fast they grow and how tall they become. Then they can pick a bouquet for their room or the kitchen table. Maybe they would rather enjoy eating the seeds after being harvested and toasted by an adult. Another idea is to leave them for the birds to enjoy which is a great way to give back to the environment.

Grow an edible plant that they love. One idea is to plant a few tomato plants, strawberries, or something especially yummy! This will encourage your children to value the fruit of their labor (no pun intended!). Once they see how much time it takes to grow just one tomato, they'll appreciate it even more. One idea is to plant strawberries in a strawberry jar that has pockets along the sides to let the vines trail out. Or maybe try the grape tomatoes

or cherry tomatoes which are small and kids love to pick a few and eat them warm from the vine. They also go well in salads and might encourage them to get their vitamins, too.

Learn about weather and environmental conditions. Growing good plants result from knowing how much to water, fertilize, and protect them from severe weather. Make sure you read the label, seed packet, or tag on whatever you intend to plant. Explain to your child how you will care for the plant together. Start a journal on the progress of your plant. This encourages your child to practice their writing skills, become observant, sensitive to nature, and be responsible for the final outcome. Don't forget to keep checking daily for dry or soggy soil and for damaged leaves from pests or severe weather, like hail or wind.

Who knows, you might just be nurturing a scientist, botanist, biologist, environmentalist, or just a child more aware of their world, discovering a new-found joy in gardening.

by Cindy Martin

