

Top Ten Tips for Gardening with Children

Compiled by Carol Burton

Children can begin gardening at almost any age, however it is best to start when they are young even as early as age two. Make sure activities and expectations are age-appropriate. Most children are interested in growing things either to watch the process or for the end product. Fall and Spring are the best seasons to start. Gardening with children during a Houston winter has many benefits, such as quick growing plants like lettuces and radishes. In winter, there are fewer insect problems for vegetables and children. Spring gardens can be planted while weather is still cool, then tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers harvested before the school year ends.



These are our top ten tips for gardening with children.

1. Keep it simple. Choose what type of garden you want to have (vegetable, herb, habitat, insectaria) and stick with it until you've had some practice. Large gardens with too many components quickly become overwhelming and require too much time (due to invading weeds).

2. Bring in good soil. Houston's clay soil does not provide the nutrients and aeration that vegetables need to be fruitful. Choosing a quality soil made from composted material and from a reliable source is critical to the success of the garden. Grow vegetables in raised beds of 6 to 8" of quality organic sandy loam soil.

3. Keep it fun! If gardening becomes too much work, children will lose interest. Keep children engaged in their garden by including them in planning what will be planted either by choosing from a list that you have created or by having them make lists from seed catalogs. By allowing children to have some say in the planning, it helps them to have a sense of ownership, and as a result, they take more responsibility for the garden.

4. Plant easy plants at the right time of year to boost success. Planting in the wrong season or planting varieties of vegetables that do not grow well in our climate (such as asparagus or celery) will yield disappointing results. If children aren't having success, they will lose interest. Legumes are a favorite because the seeds are large for tiny hands and are easy to sprout. Children can see results quickly. The trick is planting the right variety at the right time for our Houston climate.

For instance, there is a window of cooler weather for bush beans to be planted in the Spring and Fall. Peas are planted in late fall/early winter and long beans in early summer. Be sure to do your homework and find out when and how to plant what you want to grow. Urban Harvest stocks Dr. Bob Randall's book, *Year Round Vegetables Fruits and Flowers for Metro Houston*, because it is a valuable source of seasonal planting information.

5. Make a plan. Decide ahead of time how the garden will be maintained with necessities such as watering, weeding, harvesting, labor and funds for supplies. Unless you have a very small garden, you will need help to keep it going. Children can help to a point, but weeding is not a favorite activity for them. Let's face it, weeding is boring if you do it too frequently. Also there will be jobs in every garden that children do not have the strength or size to complete. It is a good idea to have a group of adult volunteers who are committed to helping maintain garden projects. When faced with continual frustration in the garden, children will lose interest quickly. Having a plan for additional help is a good way to mitigate frustration, hopefully, before it begins.



6. Eat what you grow. Children enjoy experiencing the garden with all of their senses and that includes tasting things! Preparing the foods that are grown in your garden can help introduce children to new foods. Eating is one of the favorite activities in our gardens. Almost any fruit is popular among children especially citrus -- such as Satsuma mandarins, Meyer lemon, grapefruit and kumquats -- as it grows well in the Houston area and is easy to maintain.

7. Start gardening with children at an early age. Experiences in nature at a young age promote environmental awareness as an adult. There is definitely a window of opportunity to fill a young child with wonder about the outdoors. As they get older, media, peers and a sedentary lifestyle play stronger roles of influence. Lay the groundwork for enjoyment of the outdoors at a young age. Even very young students find composting and vermiculture a fascination. Older children can be more involved in connecting gardening projects to real life problems, such as diverting kitchen and yard waste from the landfill by recycling green waste through a composting station.

8. Offer help with visual and spatial reasoning skills. These are skills needed in order to plant seeds in a grid, equally spaced, in a straight line, and planted at the appropriate depth. Even after a demonstration, children will often plant seeds all in one spot. Use visual aids such as a ruler and craft sticks to measure and mark where the seeds will be planted. Show children how to plant their seed next to the craft stick, so plants will be evenly spaced. Use body parts for measurement -- make shallow holes up to the top of their fingernail or up to their first knuckle for a 1-inch hole. Ask children to demonstrate. Allow for close plantings and thin seedlings later. Another favorite planting method is broadcasting tiny seeds by dropping "pinches" of seeds into the planting area.

9. Don't use chemicals or pesticides in and around the garden. Pesticide and chemical exposure to children is highly dangerous. Their organs and bodies are still developing and exposure at a young age leads to greater health risks. Garden organically and use sustainable methods for healthier kids, food and the environment.

10. Plant for wildlife. Planting native plants ensures that your garden will attract native insects, birds and reptiles. This allows greater opportunities for children to enjoy the wonders of nature and small creatures. It enhances learning and understanding of life sciences through direct experiences. By increasing the biodiversity of the environment, habitat lost by urban development is restored. A balanced ecosystem also enhances the vegetable garden by providing beneficial insects and pollinators.

Urban Harvest offers gardening classes for growing vegetables, fruits and the basics of organic gardening in the Houston area. For more information visit: www.urbanharvest.org

