



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Gardening with Kids

Kids and gardening are a natural combination. There's dirt, it's messy, the textures are interesting; you can grow food; there are bright colors, interesting smells, even some water play. Kids like to garden until it becomes a chore, or has too many rules

Plants and healthy soil attract insects (some pests, some not), spiders, lizards, frogs, toads, birds, worms, and interesting fungus, bacteria, & other creatures. My dad and I built a greenhouse when I was a young teenager, and one evening I found a foot-long slender worm-like creature with a shovel-shaped head snaking through the stepstones. Have you ever seen a "shovel-headed slug?" It's a type of flatworm.

Gardening with kids presents so many different teaching opportunities that parents often forget it can just be fun, too. Kids today learn a lot about the environment at school. Your garden can be a microcosm of the environment, with lots of opportunities to compare what is going on there with what they see in farms, parks, and wild areas.

Some things to think about when gardening with kids:

choosing a theme

Vegetables and herbs always appeal to younger kids.

Fragrant plants and interesting leaf textures can be enjoyed by people with poor vision.

Flowers for cutting appealed to my 11 year old daughter and her friends, who formed a club and made money selling bouquets to neighbors.

[I used to sell zucchini door-to-door when I was young, and I think some of our neighbors actually appreciated it.]

Types of seeds

When gardening with younger kids, use big seeds so they can handle them easily:

sunflowers, nasturtiums, beans, beets, melons, cucumbers, corn, and squash.

If you are planting flowers, ask them to pick out seeds from the pictures on the seed packets (and then check to make sure it's the right season to plant them).

Annual flowers that are easy to grow from seed in the spring and summer include

Cosmos, Sunflower, Nigella (fascinating seed capsules), Marigold, Zinnia, Aster, Cockscomb (bizarre, brain-shaped flowers), Nasturtium, and Sweet Alyssum.

Using color

Young kids usually like bright primary colors -- yellow, red, and blue -- and dramatic secondary colors such as orange. More sophisticated kids learn to appreciate cooler colors like lavender and purple, grey & white, and subtler shades of pink.

Using contrast

If you are planting a perennial border, or just adding some perennials to your existing landscape, look for interesting foliage colors and textures. Plants such as Lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*), 'Silver Mound' *Artemisia*, and the fuzzy-leaved scented geraniums always seem to appeal.

Mixing types of plants and contrasting colors in an informal planting gives better results than rigid straight rows.
Getting started

Find a place with at least 4 - 6 hours of sun if possible, because that gives you more plants to choose from. [There *are* plants that will succeed in shade, though] Be sure to describe your sun exposure to your nursery professionals. To make "dirt" into "soil" you need to turn in some organic compost; and a slow-acting starter fertilizers will help feed the young

plants all season long.

If you're limited for space, a small garden can be created in a container. The bigger the pot you use, the easier it will be to keep it watered in the summer. Oak wine or whiskey barrels are the most economical large containers. You can mix flowers, herbs, miniature roses, or dwarf varieties of vegetables.

Watering

Put in a simple watering system.

Run drip tubing near each plant or group of plants and pop in an emitter every 1 - 2' so you can water the whole garden at once. For large areas mini-sprinklers can be installed on the same type of tubing. It's important to run drip or mini-sprinkler systems for a long time -- 1 - 4 hours, depending on the type -- to give a deep soaking.

Mechanically inclined kids, especially between about 6 and 10 years old, really enjoy assembling drip irrigation systems. These systems are simple, easy to modify, and involve no gluing. And... mistakes are easy to correct!

Weeding

Spend a little time each day pulling weeds.
Intruders!

Don't worry too much about some cosmetic damage. Learn about your "pests" before you panic or spray. Most insects are harmless and many are very beneficial, so it's important to identify your critter and learn about its life cycle to determine how (or if!) you are going to treat for it. Most kids are interested in bugs, so even pests can be an education opportunity. Mixed plantings will draw beneficial insects and provide cover for them, so don't keep your garden too tidy. Sweet Alyssum, a popular annual bedding flower, is known to draw beneficial insects into the garden.

There are four things all plants need:

light, water, nutrients (soil, fertilizer) and air.

The key to successful gardening is learning how each plant differs in its needs for these, and how to protect it from pests and extreme environmental conditions. Gardening with kids helps teach them about climate, biology, soil science, & entomology; provides them with an appreciation of nature; and teaches them -- and you! -- patience.