

Tips for gardening with children

Give them their own garden beds. Whether you use raised beds, containers or ground plots, be sure to give each child his or her own separate plot. Keep it small, very small for young kids. Put their plots right in the middle of the action, with the best soil and light. Set them up for success.

Reuse the sandbox. If your children have grown past their sandbox years, consider converting the old sandbox to a garden bed. This gives the child continued 'ownership' of a familiar space and encourages a sense of responsibility to the gardening project. Of course, a productive garden bed needs to be in good sunlight and soil should be free of tree roots. It may be necessary to relocate the sandbox if growing conditions are less than ideal.

Give them serious tools. Cheap plastic child's gardening tools are worse than no tools at all; they break easily and frustrate the user. It can be hard to locate good tools for kids, especially work gloves that fit a small hand. With some garden tools, like a hoe or spade, you can easily saw the handle shorter. Let them use your tools if need be; in this way you're acknowledging the importance of the work they're doing.

Engage them through the entire process, from seed to table. Children learn better when they understand the context of their activity. They will learn that gardening can be fun, but far more than idle play; they are contributing to the family well-being. Besides planting and nurturing their garden beds, be sure they alone do the harvesting and preparation of their crop for the table, no matter how modest the offering.

Start from seeds. While it's a convenient shortcut to buy starters, children will learn more by seeing the growing process as it begins, from seed. The care given to sprouting seeds and nurturing the young seedling are a valuable part of the gardening experience. Seeds will need to be started indoors in a warm room and once sprouted they can be transplanted into pots until ready to set out, or they can be placed into a [cold frame](#) which is set on top of the garden bed.

Cheat a little. Depending on the age of the child, you may need to help out a little 'behind the scene'. Not every garden task is pleasant, and the child may not be ready at all times for all chores. You may need to go out in the evening to pick a few slugs off the lettuce, or be the one to run out and move the sprinkler. They don't have to know about every little help you offer - the child's 'ownership' of the plot is the main thing.

When all else fails, make a scarecrow. The best time to engage children in gardening is when they're in the mood for this activity. If their attention wanes, or the garden tasks become boring, let them build a scarecrow. This activity is still a contribution to the gardening effort and adds another layer of interest to the garden scene. It also reminds the child of the importance of the garden crops.

Show off their work. When giving 'garden tours' to friends, be sure to point out the children's beds. Take a photo of their harvest and send it to the grandparents. The attention given to their work is the best motivator for children to stay involved with a project.

If your kids are just itching to get outside each morning to see how their garden has grown and play in it, then you know you have done your job well. Here are some ideas for children's gardens:

1. Sunflower Houses – This is my number one pick. You can use sunflowers to create a rectangular or square section for the house. Once the sunflowers grow to almost full height you can take string and tie the tops together to form a string “roof” then morning glories can be grown up the sunflowers until they reach the string and fill in the roof. The whole concept is outlined in one of the BEST books on gardening with kids called [Sunflower Houses](#) by Sharon Lovejoy.



2. A garden tee-pee. This is similar to the sunflower house in concept. You put wooden poles in the ground and angle them to form a tee-pee. Make sure it is big enough for kids to play inside. Then plant vines like morning glories, beans, and gourds so that the walls will fill in with vegetation. Guide the vines at first to make sure that an entrance is left open for little bodies to crawl through.

3. Try a Moon Garden – Instead of making a tee-pee with plants that flower during the day, you can also grow a moon garden and use plants that flower at night. Then the kids can spend some evenings outdoors looking at the stars and fireflies. Moonflowers would be perfect to climb the tee-pee walls and for around the perimeter you could plant evening primrose and four-o'clocks.

4. Grow some unique and whimsical plants. What kids wouldn't like to grow some bleeding hearts, sunflowers, or gourds that can be hollowed out to make bird houses and musical instruments? Let them pick out the plants that appeal to them.

5. Make a rainbow – Have the kids help you pick out flowers or herbs in the 6 different rainbow colors... red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Plant them in curving rows with gravel or rocks between each row. When they bloom you will have a rainbow!

6. Create a fairy garden. Use twigs and sticks that have fallen from nearby trees to make fairy houses and furniture. Use tempera paints to give them color and texture. You can even use one half of fallen nuts to make little boats for them too.

7. Make a Pizza Patch! Carve out a circular section for this one and divide it into sections or slices. In each section grow a different pizza ingredient like tomatoes, garlic, onions, oregano, basil, rosemary, etc. When harvest time comes go out together and gather your ingredients and make pizza from scratch together. This can be cooked or raw pizza. :)

8. Build a worm box. Worms are an important part of any garden. They help us recycle waste into compost and by building a worm box or house you can get lots of wonderful compost and feed the worms your kitchen scraps. You can build your own worm box or buy one and it is a great scientific experiment for kids to be a part of. Check out the book [Worms Eat My Garbage](#) for more details.

Other inspirational books include:

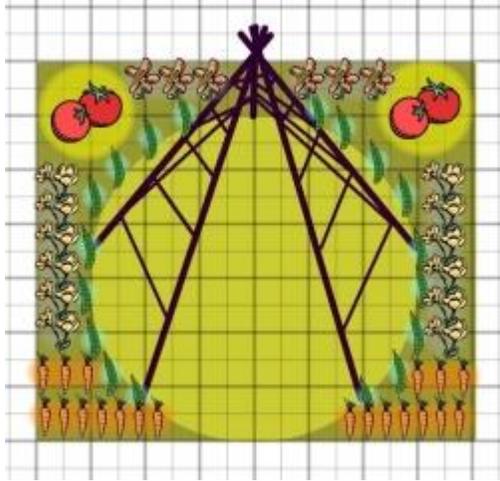
[Roots, Shoots, Buckets, and Boots](#) – Another of my all time faves!! It has instructions for sunflower houses, moon gardens, and various theme gardens.

[Children's Gardens](#) – Has really elaborate details and plans for making bird gardens, a circus garden, a water garden, a picnic garden, and much more.

[I love Dirt!](#)

Kids' Vegetable Garden Layout

Educational and fun!

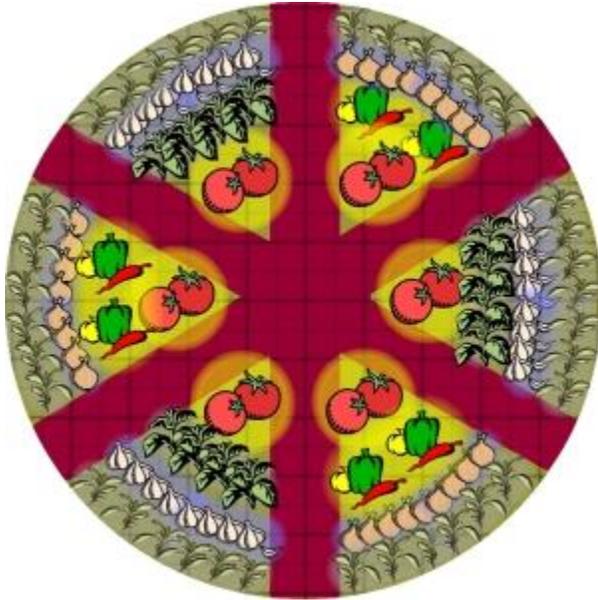


A child's garden is very educational and a great incentive to get your children helping in the garden and also to eat vegetables which they have grown themselves. If your children are old enough, get them involved in choosing which vegetables to grow and in creating their own vegetable garden plans.

The vegetable garden plan shown here consists of a tepee made from 5 long sticks, fastened together at the top. Sugar snap peas, which are fun to pick and eat right there, are then planted around the base and allowed to climb up the tepee on strings which have been strung between the sticks (leaving one section free for the doorway). Mulch inside the tepee.

Pizza garden layout

A novelty vegetable garden plan



Are you a gardener who loves cooking? What about pizzas? Do you love pasta sauces? For the freshest, best tasting Italian tomato sauces you could grow your own ingredients. And if you want something a little special, you could always try this novelty vegetable garden plan.

Shaped like a pizza, this vegetable garden includes basil, oregano, garlic, marjoram, onions and tomatoes (for the sauce) and peppers (for the pizza topping). Or simply blend all these ingredients together and add Parmesan cheese, salt and pepper for a yummy pasta sauce. And all from your own pizza garden. :-

Children's Gardens

It is a great idea to create an area for your children to [play in the garden](#), but often we don't want to see the 'mess' they create. Screening is ideal to hide away their toys and play equipment, etc. [Screening](#) can be of either hedges, low fences, climbing plants entwining through trellis so that you can still 'keep an eye' on the younger ones.

Behind the screening may then lie the secret gardens, [gardening ideas](#) such as the children's hideaways or, more prosaically, the various utility areas. A play area can be set up very economically - very small children will be happy with just a sandpit and a paddling pool. For safety reasons, the latter should be a cheap, plastic, ready-made-pool which can be emptied at the end of each session to prevent any accidents. All you will have to do is provide a smooth, level surface for it, to reduce the risk of accidents. Grass or sand would do the trick.

Children's Gardens - The Sandpit

The sandpit can be made from any materials that you have to hand or can forage for. It is best sunk whole or partially into the ground, with a retaining wall and some form of coping to provide a seat and surface for mud-pies. The side walls can be made of bricks, blocks, slabs or timber, which should be planed to prevent painful splinters, and treated with preservative. All these materials are easy to find. The flat coping can be made from the same range of materials, and the wider the coping, the better. The larger the sandpit, the more scope there will be for its continued use as the children grow older.

Excavate the pit, removing the topsoil and saving it to use elsewhere, as usual. Make the pit about 45cm (18") deep and construct the side walls. If the pit is going to have hard use from older children, it will be worth giving the side walls a good foundation. When the walls are made, place a 5cm (2") layer of fine hardcore or gravel on the bottom of the pit and cover this with a 2.5cm (1") layer of builder's sand. On this lay a base of concrete slabs (broken ones would be fine), leaving 2cm (3/4") gaps between them, for drainage. Fill the pit with silver sand or fine, washed builder's sand. The ordinary yellow builder's sand is fine from the children's point of view but it stains their clothes yellow. To keep the sand free from fallen leaves and cats, construct a simple frame of battens to fit over it and nail wire or plastic mesh over the frame. This is quicker, easier, cheaper and better than a solid lid, as the sand will stay sweeter if it is exposed to the elements.

If you have the space and enough materials left over, build a small 'table' at about 45-50cm (18"-20") high, to take a shallow tray of water, for water-play and sailing small plastic or paper boats on. About 10cm (4") of water would be enough and, at that height, should be safe, too. The tray can be made of bricks or timber with a plastic lining. Alternatively, you may find a ready-made tray in your wanderings, some kind of shallow metal or plastic container. I have one that was used to carry loaves round a bakery.

It is quite easy to make simple play equipment for slightly older children out of salvaged materials. A section of log and a planed plank will make a basic see-saw, while a series of logs, sunk into the ground at varying heights, make good stepping stones, and others, topped with planks, would provide an exciting catwalk. If you have a [suitable tree](#), it is easy enough to make swings and trapezes from ropes and bits of wood, while old car tyres, hanging from a branch or beam, are another good bet, and are less likely to cause painful knocks and bruises. If you have the space and a little more skill, you can devise a really ambitious adventure trail from old timbers, with catwalks, monkey-runs, forts, water, ropes and climbing nets, etc.

Note: It's worth reading these important few points about gardening for kids.

1. Kids don't mind taking all the time in the world when you're in a hurry... sigh, but with gardening, let them go with flow. Lie under a tree if necessary and observe the world, feel the warmth or wind, laugh at the snow and listen to the noises. Of course if you're all in danger of turning blue or pink, hurry back!



2. Just as it's nice to simply lie under a tree or stir mud in a pond, remember children usually hate dancing in the same spot for too long, if you get what I mean, so it's a good idea to spend up to 15 minutes only on one activity before changing tack.

Depending on age most kids love to water and plant things. When it comes to maintenance and preparation tasks like weeding, mulching and thinning out, that's when you can say something like, "10 minutes weeding, then we'll water the cabbages, or have a treasure hunt, or pick some peas."



3. We would love the children of the world to grow up self-reliant and with good business values. But at the same time with a few different environmental and sustainability ethics, rather than what a few rapacious ratbags are doing now.

If you nurture in kids kindness and respect for other people and nature, including plants and wildlife, they themselves will be nurturing, imaginative and community minded sunny buttercups indeed.

So tell them that plants need a nice cool drink when they're thirsty, just like you!

Explain that plants like to be fed wholesome food. Funny how they don't have mouths, but they have roots with little hairs on that take up the nutrients.

Plants need sun, not because it's nice to flop down in the sun after a swim, but because of photosynthesis (ooh long word — make up a game later with this word) whereby plants make carbohydrates by trapping the sun's energy with their green colour, a pigment called chlorophyll (ooh again).

We can't produce our own energy, in fact it's impossible for us and all animals to convert solar energy into carbohydrates, but PLANTS can.

So we have to get carbohydrates from plants and other tiny growing organisms, which our bodies then convert into sugars that give us energy to grow and live.

Ask your child if they like to win a race — race them if you like. Now tell them that insects, birds and animals are competitive too and they aim to grow more, get the tastiest morsels, hang out in the best spots where their mates go — although they do it as a survival instinct rather than for fun.

Explain that's why pests are pests, they really aren't making holes in the cabbage leaves 'cos they like the lacy look; no, they want to grow up big and happy and turn into butterflies, just like kids want to grow up and turn into film stars... or environmentalists, horticulturalists, toxicologists... okay, at least gardeners.



Thus the caterpillar has a life, but nature keeps the balance. So it's okay to squash the caterpillars that eat our food, but not to kill ALL of the caterpillars in the world because then some birds would die without their favourite meal.

Those birds would not be around to then eat other insects which could then multiply too much. Also other wildlife would miss their bird meals, such as snakes or even spiders (yes there are bird eating spiders) and they would perish and nature's balance would be upset.



4. If helping with a full-on garden seems too ambitious at the start when gardening with kids, try something simpler. There are lots of kids' gardening activities that don't involve an actual garden.

Wonderful sensory experiences can be gained by growing plants, making something out of natural materials, or generally pottering around with bugs, animals, dirt, stones, water and other life inspiring stuff.

Time to make some world champion gardeners. Have a look at these good old, reliable, and some off-the-planet new ideas for fun and informative gardening with children — and of course you.

[Gardening Activities for kids](#) Whoo hoo, wheelbarrows full of fun garden games, absorbing projects, and interesting activities for family gardening.

[Kids Garden Crafts](#) Take some of nature's materials and turn them into delightful bits and pieces to display, give away, play with or re-use another time. Here you'll find clear instructions, for all ages and abilities, to make things outside or inside on a rainy day.

[Children's Gardening Educational Benefits](#) Essential reading if you want to understand and guide your child to experience the huge and wonderful advantages of nature's playground.

If you're having trouble getting the kids to eat vegetables, click over to this page: [Vegetable Tips for Kids](#).

Vegetable Tips for Kids



While the headline says vegetable tips for kids, they are really for you, and I think we both know it...

There is no simple solution to get a picky eater to eat something that's good for them. Outlined below are a few strategies to try.

So now you've got all these wonderful fresh vegetables growing in your garden how do you get the kids to eat them?

We should be eating 5-9 servings of fruit and vegetables a day. Many adults don't get the full servings required and you know the kids are getting a fraction of that.

- Start them young with a wide variety of tastes. If you get them between 2-4 years of age you're more likely to capture them for life.
- Set a good example. If you snack on fruits and veggies, then your children are more likely to follow your lead.

- Try to prepare interesting after school or between meal snacks. I used to prepare a selection of cut up fruit, dried fruit, raw vegetables and two squares of chocolate. Okay, the chocolate always went first, but then they moved on to the good stuff to fill up.
- Keep mixing it up. Prepare new types of vegetables or prepare them in different ways. Let them try just a small bit. If they don't like it, fine. Just keep serving the stuff up.
- Never make your dinner table a battle-ground. It's not worth it. If they are not forced to eat something they hate, they are more likely to continue trying different foods.
- When all else fails, disguise it. Shred some carrot or zucchini into pancakes or hash brown potatoes. Blend vegetables into soups, pasta sauces or on pizza.
- Involve them in the process. Take them shopping and let them pick out the veggies. Have them help plan and prepare the meals. Get them into their own gardening project!
- And for something really left field, try the sweets recipe called [Vegetable Fudge](#).



Vegetable Fudges

Now for something completely different!

I know it sounds really bad, but it's really good! It tastes like a veggie free zone, so if you really feel like you have to sneak it into family and friends, do it with dessert!

Different vegetables and fruits can be used in this recipe to vary it. You can add apple; chocolate; carrot; beetroot. Try your own varieties and see what happens.

The base recipe is this:

3 heaped tablespoons of butter
 2 cups sugar
 1 x 400g can condensed milk

Prepare a greased square slice pan or dish. Heat the butter and sugar very gently and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Add half a cup of finely shredded fruit or vegetable, then add the condensed milk.

Stir constantly and keep the heat low or your mixture will burn. After about 20 minutes your mixture will be bubbling throughout. If you want to add chocolate at this stage, you can. Six squares of cooking chocolate should be about right. Once it's completely blended throughout, pour into your dish and let it cool.

Cut into squares and enjoy!

Vegetable Pancakes

This dish is suitable for breakfast, lunch or dinner. It goes with just about anything you want to add to fill out the meal, depending on the time of day. Yummy!

Pancake batter
500g grated zucchini
2 spring onions
3 eggs
1/2c soy flour
1/4c fresh coriander, chopped
Black pepper to taste

Make up the pancake batter first. Squeeze out the grated zucchini and put into a mixing bowl. Add all other listed ingredients and mix before adding to the batter.

Spread about 2 tablespoons of batter mixture for each pancake into a lightly oiled non stick frypan on medium heat. Cook until golden brown (about 3 minutes) on one side and flip.

Sure, it's different. But this isn't where you come for conventional, is it?

Comforting thought for the day? One day they will reminisce fondly about those great tasting, home grown vegetables.