



# Gardening with Youth

*Resource Sheet*

Gardening with children requires expansion and deletion. We broaden our horizons as we seek to enhance the scope of activities that stimulate the natural sense of curiosity inherent in children and limit the list of pre-planned instructions of don'ts and shoulds. Goals of a beautiful garden, replete with artistically laid out mixtures of perfect carrots, beautifully spaced and thinned out lettuces, bordered with an array of glorious flowers, might have to be changed to fit the interests of younger members of the family. Kids have a wonderful ability to respond to situations and people that allow their personalities to shine through. They appreciate people who notice their successes, rather than things they may not be developmentally or emotionally ready to accomplish.

Adults who have gardened with children notice that they love to grow a lot of different plants all together, which all grow quickly. It is the instant response mode to their work (ah, the impatience of childhood). Tiny seeds, such as basil, chamomile or carrots might not be the best to try. Yet quickly sprouting radishes, peas (that are a manageable size for little hands to pick up), cress (that can go from seed to salad ingredient in 10 days), gourds, pumpkins and sunflowers are the elements of success.

Small, quiet spaces that provide shade and an area away from adults can be magical hideouts for the budding gardener. Try a project in which youth grow their own sunflower-morning glory house. Several kids can outline the borders of the house as a rectangle, leaving an open space for the door. Every foot or so, plant 2-3 seeds of Mammoth or Giant Gray Stripe sunflowers. Around the sunflower seeds, plant a circle of 6-8 Heavenly Blue morning glory seeds. As the sunflowers grow, the morning glories vine around them. Adult help is needed when the sunflowers bloom and begin to nod their heads. Using a ladder, weave their heads together with soft twine. The vines will spread their tendrils over the top of the roof and bloom contentedly with no further support needed. Children love the shady, special house they have grown and often use it for a secret gathering place of their own. Variations on the old bean teepee, planted with scarlet runner beans and gourds appeal to children's sense of fast growing Jack-in-the-Beanstalk type of meandering, fairy tale growth. The gourds that are interspersed among the beans hang down like other worldly creatures and can be utilized for birdhouses or feeders later in the autumn. This also gives children a sense that garden crops are not only edible, but also a source of many useful craft items.

Fun things to grow include trumpet vines, with their hummingbird attracting flowers and wonderful seed pods which follow, the annual Devil's Claw vine, with fantastically shaped fibrous seed pods, grape vines, Ravennae grass, with 6-7 foot seed stalks to carry and wave about. Italian heirloom Lagenaria summer squash produces 2-3 foot long twisted fruit, and Armenian cucumbers grow giant 3 foot long, deliciously mild cucumbers. As baby cucumbers are first being produced, children can scratch the outline of a fish on them with a pencil and then carefully insert them in a bottle. This never fails to produce wonder (how in the world do you catch a fish in a bottle?).

Plant a rainbow garden with rainbow colored plants interspersed with straw pathways. Choices might include: salvia (red), calendula (orange), lemon gem marigold (yellow), chamomile (green), lobelia (blue), petunias (purple) and violets (violet). Have kids outline a pot shape at the end of the rainbow, fill the outline with small stones and plant the pot at the end of the rainbow with California poppies.

Utilize smells of all types—scented geraniums, various mints in pots, and lemon verbena for teas and potpourris (keep a sprig in pockets to pull out and smell). Different textures, such as soft, downy leaves of lamb's ears and mullein, the almost fake feel of statice and strawflowers, balloon flowers (Platycodon), Love-in-a-Mist, and false dragonhead (Physostegia) whose stems children can twist and turn into fantastic shapes are entrancing.

Build a garden for children and insects. Butterfly bushes, Mexican sunflowers (Tithonia) and fennel are all attractive to various butterflies and beneficial insects. Treat insects as part of the natural garden environment—part of the wonder of planting, nurturing, harvest and the connection between all living things. Grow slowly and appreciate the excitement that nurturing creativity in children can bring.

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