

## **Gardens grow happy, healthy kids**

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Wiggly worms, furry leaves, and loads of dirt – it's no wonder why children love gardening so much! As adults, most of us understand the healing powers of working the earth, but gardening is a hobby that kids enjoy as well. Gardening with our children is not only fun, it helps to grow healthy kids who possess practical scientific knowledge.

Getting kids interested in gardening is simple; the common problem lies in keeping their attention for an entire growing season. The key to keeping little ones interested is maintaining short, simple projects and chores. Gardening for short periods of time and frequently changing tasks will keep children engaged. Make sure that the garden experience is filled with fun activities and not just the tedious weeding and digging.

Start by letting your youngster choose some of their own child-sized tools. This will ensure that he or she is comfortable while gardening. Let them decide what they want to grow, concentrating on the things they like while suggesting a few new vegetables. It is also important to choose a few varieties that are fast growing for the impatient, young gardener. Radishes are the perfect choice for a more immediate reward. If you have a little extra area, give kids their own plot. You will be amazed at your child's excitement to eat the fruits and vegetables that they have grown. Sneaky, but effective!

To increase interest and wonder, look for unusual fruits and vegetables. There are lots of new and interesting varieties that children and adults can get excited about. Have you ever seen red or purple carrots? What about blue potatoes or purple tomatoes? Anything other than what they are used to seeing in the supermarket will pique their curiosity.

Another way to encourage young gardeners is to plant a themed garden. Most kids love pizza, so why not establish a pizza garden? Make sure to include all their favorite toppings and herbs for seasoning. Some good choices are tomatoes, onions, peppers, basil, oregano, rosemary, thyme, and fennel. A salsa garden or a stir-fry garden is also a fun way to get kids involved in growing and eating vegetables.

It can be torture waiting for tiny seeds to grow into tasty treats, so fill that time with other garden projects. Help your children paint garden signs in order to identify their plants. Or spend a day making stepping stones together. You can purchase a kit at most craft stores, but making your own can be less expensive and more creative. If you are growing vegetables in containers, painting the pots can be a fun activity for young, artistic gardeners

This in-between time can also be a good opportunity to talk to kids about the different insects in the garden. Discuss good and bad bugs, and let them know which ones they may touch and which ones may sting or bite. Borrow some books about insects from the library and see if you can identify your critters together.

It's [February] the perfect time of the year to prepare your garden for the warm-season vegetables. So grab your kids and get out to the garden for some educational family fun. For more information on gardening with children, contact the Indian River County IFAS/Extension office at (772) 770-5030.