

Grow a Gardener

Do your kids think peas come from a bag in the freezer? Do they know potatoes grow underground? Could they recognize a carrot growing if they saw the green tops poking out of the soil? A lot of parents and grandparents are realizing many of today's children are growing up without an understanding of where their food really comes from.

Perhaps you are a seasoned gardener or maybe you are someone who has just started thinking about getting your hands dirty. Whatever your gardening experience may be, spring has sprung and now is the perfect time to think about planting and growing with your children. I don't have a lot of gardening experience myself, but I do try to grow a few things each year so my kids can appreciate how food is grown. Young children have a natural curiosity about the world around them and gardening is a perfect way to tie in valuable lessons like *patience* - as they wait for vegetables to grow, *responsibility* - as they take over watering duties and the *value of healthy eating* - as children are often more enthusiastic about trying vegetables they have grown themselves.

Gardening doesn't necessarily require a plot of land or hours of weeding. Gardening can happen in containers on a balcony or patio. In fact, many garden plants such as herbs, lettuce, radishes, and tomatoes do very well in containers. Raised beds can eliminate the need for weeding and are great for compact spaces. Try the square foot garden method and give your child a square of their own to care for. This popular method teaches gardening skills without being overwhelming.

Watching a plant grow from a seed is like magic for young children, but slow germination rates can be trying for even the most patient child. Plant a mixture of seeds and potted plants to help keep their interest. Sunflowers and beans are fast growing plants from seed. When my son was in preschool, he started a sunflower from a seed and was absolutely amazed at how tall it grew; he was so proud to share the seeds with all of his little friends.

If you lack suitable space to garden at home, consider renting a plot at a community garden. Involving your kids in a community garden exposes them to an amazing variety of vegetables grown by many different gardeners. Kids and parents involved with community gardens also benefit from the wisdom of other gardeners. Connect with your local food action committee, community or health centre to find out if there is a community garden near you.

If you have a child in school, ask if there is interest in starting a school garden. Planning for a school garden can start now and carry over into the fall so that the school garden will be ready to plant next spring. For information on school gardens see <http://healthyeatingatschool.ca/>.

These websites can help you and your kids start gardening: <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/firstgarden/> and <http://www.kidsgardening.org/>

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