

Thursday, March 28, 2002

FAMILY

Green Thumbs for Little Sprouts

Nurturing youngsters in the garden takes patience, togetherness and a few sly tricks.

By BRENDA REES, Special to The Times

Here in Southern California, year-round gardening can take root in any backyard, apartment balcony or local community garden plot. From coffee cans to elaborate raised beds, gardens come in all shapes and sizes.

For kids, gardens can be a learning experience, a science experiment, an art project, a family activity or a way to contribute to the dinner table.

And while it may be tough for some kids to exchange video games and the Internet for a shovel and a sack of fertilizer, parents can cultivate in their children a lifelong love of the plant kingdom.

"The key thing is to give children of any age a sense of ownership. This is their garden, they have to take care of it," says Amy Gifford, gardening associate at the National Gardening Assn. "Parents can nurture that sense of pride, design [the garden] with them, play with them in it, make it fun and exciting."

Garden designer Tony Kienitz agrees that a successful gardener comes from a successful garden. The Pasadena-based Kienitz has designed many children's gardens for clients. He advises matching a child's developmental needs and interests to the garden, separating their interest into three age groups.

"From toddlers to 5-years-olds, it's all about seeds. They love to see the seeds go in the ground, and of course there's the 'digging in the dirt' factor," he explains.

"Five- to 10-year-olds, on the other hand, are fascinated with food and growing something to eat. That's when you create those pizza or spaghetti gardens planting tomatoes, basil, onions, etc."

For older kids, Kienitz suggests getting them involved by letting them design the garden, piecing the plant shapes, sizes and the colors together like a game or puzzle. "At some point, let the kid teach you," he says. "Tell them that in the garden they are the boss, and see what happens then. You might learn something."

To foster a quick sense of accomplishment among the youngest set, Kienitz admits to a few sly tricks. After planting seeds with them, he has secretly returned a few days later with small starter plants and waited for the squeals of delight. But isn't that cheating?

"You have to make kids feel like they have succeeded, that is the No. 1 rule," argues Kienitz. "You hear adults say they have black thumbs, and I am sure it's because they tried once or twice and failed. You have got to make kids think they can do this."

Brooke Goldstein of Northridge admits that she doesn't know that much about gardening, but that doesn't stop her and her 6-year-old son, Dylan, from experimenting in their backyard garden. "It's very satisfying to Dylan to see how things grow, learning that big, circle of life stuff. What he doesn't like is the maintenance, the weeding," she says with a sigh and a laugh.

The Goldsteins have been attending monthly gardening classes sponsored by the Arboretum of Los Angeles County in Arcadia. (The Fullerton Arboretum also offers gardening classes for children.)



Lisa Beach, education specialist at the L.A. Arboretum, supervises a Saturday youth gardening class.

CLARENCE WILLIAMS
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Dylan and other kids in the Garden Sprouts program play nature games, do garden crafts and then spend some time in the Arboretum's Roots and Shoots garden tending their plants.

Keep Kids Involved by Working With Them

Lisa Beach, education specialist at the L.A. Arboretum, says that to keep kids in the garden, parents need to set a good example get in the garden with them to plant, weed and rejoice when a seedling takes hold. "Nature projects are also good ways to keep their interest," she adds, such as creating homemade stepping stones, birdfeeders, birdbaths and scarecrows.

If you don't want to tackle a garden alone, get inspired at a nearby community garden that showcases a wide variety of gardening styles and gardeners. With more than 60 locations around Los Angeles County, community gardens offer more than just a physical space, but an engaging environment for kids to learn, says Yvonne Savio, manager of the Common Ground Garden Program, a division of the University of California Cooperative Extension.

"Many community gardens are intergenerational, intercultural, with all types of people coming together to do the same thing," explains Savio. "Kids get to work with their neighbors and share with others. They learn that the world is contained in every garden and in every gardener."

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Easy-to-Grow Plants for First Garden

For first-time gardeners, experts suggest trying brightly colored flowers or vegetables in unusual colors such as purple potatoes or yellow pear tomatoes. Big seeds such as corn, beans and sunflowers are easier for little hands to hold and examine. Bulbs are great container plants that require little maintenance once in the ground.

Here are some other easy-to-grow suggestions:

Flowers: marigolds, zinnias, sages (red, purple, etc.), cosmos, snapdragons, daisies, sweet peas, nasturtiums, scarlet runner beans.

Vegetables: peas, radishes, purple bean bushes, alfalfa sprouts, rainbow chards, beets (white, orange, red, pink), giant or miniature pumpkins (especially white), squashes, Malabar spinach, orange cherry tomatoes.

Brenda Rees

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Saturday Kids' Garden Club, first Saturday of every month at [Los Angeles County Arboretum](#), 301 N. Baldwin Ave., Arcadia, (626) 821-3222. \$10 per class for members, \$12 nonmembers; or \$25 a quarter for members, \$30 nonmembers.

Saturday garden classes, various days for kids, ages 3 to 12, at [Fullerton Arboretum](#), 1900 Associated Road, Fullerton, (714) 278-3579. \$3 per child per class.

For information about community gardens, contact Common Ground at (323) 838-4540.