

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Having fresh nutritious foods at hand is just one of many reasons to have a garden. The process of planting, watching over, and harvesting a garden provides daily opportunities for young children to learn valuable lessons, enjoy physical activity, and reap the fruits and vegetables of their labor. Many education activities, such as art, reading, and math skills, can be part of a garden project.

Tips from the Experts on Successful Gardening with Young Children

Start small - with a salad bowl garden.

If you (or one of your center's staff) are an experienced gardener, you have an idea of what size garden will work in your situation. If you are new to gardening, start small in just a couple of containers or a few square feet in the yard. Pick easy-to-grow plants for salads: a variety of leaf lettuces, some radishes, a cherry tomato plant, and some fragrant herbs, like basil, dill, or parsley. Window boxes and recycled plastic containers, like well-cleaned milk or detergent bottles with tops cut off, work especially well.

Choose child-sized tools.

Young children do best with tools that fit easily into their hands. Get child-sized hoes, rakes, and shovels at a nursery or garden center. Try to find strong, genuine looking tools so that children feel like real gardeners. Can't afford new tools? Large kitchen spoons and spatulas, perhaps from a yard sale, work great in containers.

Be prepared for less-than-perfect plantings.

It's important for children to feel like the garden is really theirs, so be willing to put up with crooked rows and mixed-up plants. They can also get attached to their weeds and want to care for them right along with the vegetables and flowers. Many children also love to play in dirt, so set aside a small area for digging, even after the planting is complete. Remember, your garden doesn't need to look perfect to produce perfectly delicious produce or to provide children with wonderful outdoor learning experiences and physical activity!



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Help for Great Gardens

Starting an outdoor garden can feel like a major project. Fortunately, most communities offer plenty of green thumbs to help get your garden growing. Volunteers could help with every aspect of your garden.

The right volunteers can help with picking the best site (plenty of sun), checking soil safety (old paint chips have contaminated some soils with lead), and preparing for planting. Some sites may need added compost or sand for proper soil consistency. Here are a few sources for your volunteer pool.

- **Parents or grandparents of children**

Extended families may have the gardening expertise you need and they may be available throughout the growing season.

- **Extension programs**

County Extension agents (through state universities) are a wonderfully reliable source of gardening information and materials. Your state and county extension services have extensive web sites on gardening.

- **Master gardeners**

These trained volunteers have specific information to help novice gardeners succeed with local growing conditions. For a national map of master gardener programs, go to www.ahs.org/master_gardeners.

- **Local garden clubs**

The mission of these clubs often includes a commitment to youth and school gardens. Check this list of state and local garden club sites to see if there is one in your area www.gardenclub.org



More Garden Fun

Use your garden in other activities. Here are just a few ways that teachers and children can have fun in and out of the garden.



- **Art projects**

The possibilities are endless. Children can draw pictures of the plants, produce, and flowers as they grow. They can also decorate fencing, wooden beds, and containers around plants or create stepping-stone paths between plantings.

- **Field trips**

You can expand children's gardening horizons with trips to local farms, farmer's markets, community gardens, and even the flower beds in local parks.

- **Reading about gardens**

There are dozens of garden-related books for children from the classics, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle to the brand new like *Too Many Zucchini for Zachary Beany* by Tina Dozauer-Ray.

- **Theme gardens**

Whether you are planting flowers or vegetables, you can have a theme for your garden. Consider a butterfly garden with attractive flowers and rocks for resting or a pizza garden featuring tomatoes, garlic, basil, peppers, and onions.

Eating Your Garden Harvest

Many nutrition experts recommend gardening as one of the best ways to get children to taste and enjoy fresh produce, especially unfamiliar vegetables. “I grew it myself” is often a real incentive for small children to try something new.

Remember, it can take a while for children to feel comfortable enough with a new food to bite into it. Research shows that it can take 6 to 12 exposures to a new food before children want to eat it. This is actually why gardening works so well. Children get familiar with a food on the vine and are not as surprised when it turns up on their plates.

Recipe to Try

Dip for Fresh Vegetables E-15¹

| | |
|--|----------|
| Lowfat plain yogurt | ½ cup |
| Reduced calorie salad dressing | 1 ¼ cups |
| OR | |
| Lowfat mayonnaise | |
| Instant nonfat dry milk reconstituted | ¼ cup |
| Dried parsley | 1 Tbsp |
| Granulated garlic | ¾ tsp |
| Onion powder | ¾ tsp |
| Salt | ¾ tsp |
| Ground black or white pepper | ¼ tsp |



Combine all ingredients. Blend well. Cover. Refrigerate until ready to serve. For best results, refrigerate overnight to develop flavor.

Number of Servings: 16
Serving size: 1 oz ladle (2 tablespoons)

Note:

You could substitute garden-fresh parsley, garlic, and onions for the dried items in the recipe.

¹USDA Recipes for Child Care. Available online at www.nfsmi.org.

This tasty dip is lower in calories, fat, and sodium than most commercial dips, and it has more nutrients because it is made with lowfat yogurt and nonfat dry milk. Children will enjoy dipping vegetables from the garden and the store into this creamy dip.



Young Children's Books on Gardening and Growing Food

- *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss
- *Carlos and the Cornfield* (also *Carlos y la Milpa de Maiz*) by Jan Romero Stevens
- *Garden of Happiness* by Erika Tamar
- *Growing Vegetable Soup* by Lois Ehlert
- *Harriet and the Garden* by Nancy Carlson
- *One Small Square Backyard* by Donald M. Silver
- *Planting a Rainbow* by Lois Ehlert
- *Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown

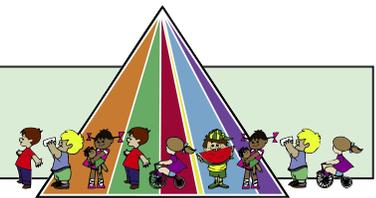
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