



Getting Youth Excited About Gardening

As you very well know, kids are very energetic and full of curiosity. We channel this excitement into educational, productive and worthwhile activities when we involve them in projects where they can see the results of their work.

One easy and inexpensive activity for young people is growing a garden. Many people may have serious reservations about whether youth really want to grow their own gardens, but it can be a fun and rewarding experience for the children and parents who are involved.

The Department of Horticulture at Cornell University conducted extensive studies on the benefits of gardening with children. Kids who work in gardens excel in many aspects of their lives.

The study concluded first that children who worked in gardens showed increased interest in eating fruit and vegetables. This leads to healthier diets, lifestyles and nutritional awareness.

The second result was that children who spent time in the garden possessed a greater appreciation and were more agreeable about working with neighborhood adults.

This led to the third outcome, which was that youth had an increased interest in keeping their homes and neighborhood clean and in good appearance if they gardened.

The fourth conclusion was that children show more positive attitudes about environmental issues after working with plants and learning how to garden.

Youth also showed a fifth benefit of positive behavioral improvement when they began to work in the garden. They showed increased self esteem, developed a greater sense of ownership and responsibility and when they worked with family members, they fostered better relationships with them.

Those who gardened had a sixth advantage. They were in better physical and mental health, such as reduced stress levels, lower blood pressure and reduced muscle tension.

Finally, kids who gardened also scored higher on scientific achievement tests due to the hands-on knowledge that they had versus the students who had no garden-based learning activities.

With all of the benefits of working in the garden, the question for many adults is how to get kids interested in gardening. There are many methods to do this and some very successful examples.

To direct young people's attention towards gardening, develop fun and interactive presentations. Many youth are turned off about the idea of growing plants because of the work involved with the projects. While it is true that gardens require maintenance, it is also true that the work involved can be fun and full of incentives.

The most important thing to do when growing a backyard garden with kids is to get them involved as full partners. Let them have the opportunity to plan the operation, grow the plants and tend the patch. Where possible let them have their own personal row or section.

We all like to have independence and authority in our lives and kids are no different. They will probably make some mistakes – especially when they start a project. We all make mistakes when we start something new and people learn best by doing.

When we let kids have autonomy and treat them as full partners in the project, they will be much more excited about growing their “own garden.”

Kids of all backgrounds are excited about growing a garden and they can have a chance to do it anywhere. They can work in a large backyard area or with several small potted plants on an apartment terrace.

Garden projects are unique because they can be adapted to urban and rural conditions in both arid and wet environments.

They are very economical as well; all that is required is soil, water, and seeds. With planning and care the harvest will save families money as well. Vegetables and fruits can be eaten fresh or preserved for use at a later date

When kids can eat what they have personally grown, they will become more involved.

Young people can grow a garden and make money. Where it is possible families often grow more than what they need for themselves. Many communities have farmers markets in the fall where people sell their own garden produce and many young people make money selling their fresh fruits and vegetables. Like everyone else, children are enticed by the prospect of making money.

One example of a very successful case of youth getting involved in growing gardens is the Tooele City Youth Gardens. Terra Sherwood, from the Tooele City Parks and Recreation, came up with the idea in 1999.

Working with Tooele City, she organized a plot of land to become a Youth Garden. She has worked hard with parents and kids to make the project successful.

Each child is given an 8’x15’ parcel and is required to care for it at least once a week or they could lose it. They care for their garden for the entire summer and can do as they please with the all of the produce.

The project has grown each year and today more than 100 youth take part in the activity and is the largest 4-H Club in Tooele County. It has proven that when given the right opportunity, kids will want to garden.

Start teaching after consulting these and other sources.

The Children’s Garden at Michigan State (www.4hgarden.msu.edu), Cornell University at (www.hort.cornell.edu/gbl/index.html), *Roots, Shoots, Buckets and Boots* by Sharon Lovejoy and the local chapter of Junior Master Gardeners (www.jmgkids.us).

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