

4 Fun Ways to Enjoy a Family Garden

The refrain from an old John Denver song suggests that there's "only two things that money can't buy and that's true love and homegrown tomatoes." Although you may find homegrown tomatoes in your farmer's markets this summer, you can't ever buy the pride and joy of picking and eating a tomato grown in your own garden! Family gardens bring many other pleasures to both adults and children - such as working together in the sun and maybe the rain; digging in the dirt with wiggly worms; watching things grow and change; and, most of all, learning to eat the freshest produce on the planet. Gardening is the best possible combination of nutrition and physical activity.

Start small - perhaps with a salad bowl garden.

If you have been gardening for years, you probably know how much work you can reasonably take on. If you've never been much of a gardener, start small - in containers or a few square feet in the yard. Concentrate easy-to-grow items for salads: a variety of leaf lettuces, some radishes, a cherry tomato plant or two, and a few fragrant herbs (such as parley and basil). Window boxes and other containers (clean bleach or milk bottles with tops cut off) work especially well for kids.

Choose child-sized tools, plants, and produce.

Children do best with things that fit well into their hands - and their mouths. Get child-sized hoes, rakes, and shovels at a nursery or garden center. Try to find strong, genuine looking tools so that little ones feel like "real" gardeners. Can't afford new tools this summer? Large recycled plastic spoons from the kitchen work great in containers. Look for specific miniature or baby vegetables plants - such as corn, radishes, tomatoes, and zucchini - just the right-size for small eaters!

Be prepared for less-than-perfect plantings.

Let's face it: gardening can be messy business. And most children love to dig in dirt, so save a small area for digging, even after planting is complete. It's important for children to feel like the garden is really theirs - so be willing to put up with crooked rows and mixed plantings. Children can also get attached to "their" weeds and want to care for them right along with the veggies and fruits. Bottom line: It doesn't have to look perfect to produce perfectly delicious produce!

Make gardening an outdoor adventure.

The most important aspect of family gardening is spending active time together - away from TVs, DVDs, video games, computers, and cell phones. Have reasonable expectations about what children will do in the garden and about how much produce you may actually get (you can always find a farmer's market if you need to). Take time to smell the herbs, roll in the grass, run in the sprinkler, and leave the garden behind for a long walk around the neighborhood.

NEED SOME BASIC OR ADVANCED GARDENING TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS? Good gardening advice is as close as your local library, bookstore, or computer. Check the children's bookshelves for age-appropriate guides like *Ready, Set, Grow! A Kid's Guide to Gardening* (by Rebecca Spohn) or *Kids Garden!* (by Avery Hart and Paul Mantell). For Montana specific tips, call your county Extension agent or visit the MSU Extension site for MontGuides on every gardening topic imaginable: <http://extn.msu.montana.edu/Publications/ESCatalog/YARDPublicCatalogYARDlist.asp?cmd=reset>