



Ten Tips on Gardening with Kids

By Rory Klick, Lake Villa, Illinois

- 1. Kid gardens must be kid-based.** This means that kids help generate the ideas for what will be there, help with construction and planting, and are responsible for maintenance. Grown-up's need to facilitate and show how, but not do everything. Focus on the process of involving them, and they will then take ownership.
- 2. Develop the garden to be appropriate for the site and regional conditions.** Involve the kids in the site analysis process so they understand how important the light, soil, drainage and other environmental factors are to having a garden. Develop the garden so the features and plant choices are adapted to local conditions, so you are not "working against nature."
- 3. Focus on functional garden design, not how it will look.** Start the design process by determining what the children want to be doing and learning in the garden. Base the features on the practical functions they will serve, and don't worry too much about aesthetics. Gardens that serve as hands-on learning laboratories for kids will be beautiful because they are well-used and well-loved spaces. Also remember that the children's sense of what is pretty may not be yours; that's ok because the garden is their space.
- 4. Be comfortable with dirt.** All kids are washable, so as long as parents have been notified about the gardening activity in advance and haven't sent them in fancy clothing, let them get dirty. If mud is a concern once the kids are going back inside the building, try plastic grocery sacks over their shoes, or set up a hand-washing and shoe-scraping station before they go back inside.
- 5. Bugs and crawly critters are cool.** Children aren't inherently afraid of things that crawl and creep. They learn that these things are bad or scary or icky from adults. When you pass on an aversion to something because of how it looks, that's called "prejudice." Worms, caterpillars, grubs, insects, spiders and all sorts of wondrous creatures are out in your garden as part of the ecosystem. Please see them as integral parts of the system, and the kids will be amazed and curious, not afraid. Check out *Worms Eat My Garbage* and other great teaching resources on garden critters.
- 6. No chemicals.** Given that you are gardening with children, this really should not need any explanation. Also in urban areas, it is advisable to have a basic soil assessment for lead and other urban contaminants to make sure your site is safe for children before the garden is developed.
- 7. Grow some things to eat.** Children are much more willing to try and consume fresh fruits and vegetables that they have grown. In fact, they likely will try things they never have eaten before *because* they have tended the plants through harvest. Since 60% of kids today don't eat enough fruits and veggies, learn more through the *There's a Rainbow on My Plate* from the USDA and other kids nutrition resources. Have a harvest celebration and encourage the kids to share their bounty with others, whether informally or through national programs like "Plant a Row."
- 8. Reinforce the lessons from the garden while indoors.** Prepare the kids for their gardening experience by asking questions like, "What will we see today?" or "How much do you think things have grown since last week?" Engage kids in keeping journals and/or scrapbooks of their garden to monitor its progress through the season and over the years. If working with a school garden, integrate the garden across disciplines beyond science.
- 9. Keep it fun.** Have enough equipment, whether trowels or watering cans, to allow small teams of 4-8 kids to work together on a task. Many children do better in small group situations, and it's also easier to guide the kids when each team has a specific assignment. Try partnering older (grades 5-8 or HS) and younger children to provide younger kids with a helper, and help older children be more responsible. Have a plan for how the kids' time in the garden will be organized so they aren't left idle for long, but also be open to the "teachable moments" that come along.
- 10. Gardening is a powerful experience for children.** Children have fewer and fewer chances to interact with the natural world, and the connection to nature is important for their development. Children who develop regard and concern for the natural world come to be good stewards of the land and its resources. Being responsible for tending a garden also fosters their sense of "nurturing" and helps them learn to care for other living things. Kids don't often hear much positive feedback from adults, and creating and tending a garden also empowers kids because they hear that they have "done a good job" from other adults.

There are many useful publications and website resources to assist you with gardening with children and about starting school gardens. Many links are found at ACGA's website www.communitygarden.org

For a terrific school garden start-up guide go to: http://celosangeles.ucdavis.edu/garden/articles/school_startup_guide.html. Copies also available by calling ACGA at 877-275-2242.

Visit the Chicago Botanic Garden and the National Botanic Garden's *School Garden Wizard* at www.schoolgardenwizard.org

