

Growing with Children: Our Experience with School Gardens in Eugene

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The following article is a sampler from a delightful booklet based on three women's experience in developing the Lane County School Garden Project. Entitled School Gardens, a Guide to organic Gardening with Children, it is an excellent introduction to gardening concepts and skills for young children. (See Additional Resources for more information.)

What could be more natural than children and growing things? The excitement of planting a seed, watching it emerge from the soil and grow into a lush pumpkin plant or a beautiful bright red zinnia holds fascination for all of us, especially children. The garden is an exciting, changing place where a child can get actively involved. A place where children become aware of the natural cycles and ecological relationships that occur within nature, where bows and whys can be explored and answered. With all the different garden activities, the learning process becomes a stimulating process, a real life project. There is no success or failure in a garden; whatever happens becomes a learning experience. The school garden can become an interesting and fun place where teachers, parents, children and community can work together. Children learn respect and appreciation for their environment by being involved in a garden. The earlier children are introduced to natural methods of gardening, the more of a way of life it will become. Organic gardening gives children the opportunity to become personally involved in the uses of energy, in food production, the recycling of waste into valuable compost, and the knowledge that the food grown is not riddled with chemicals. Natural agriculture is a healthier and safer way for children to know the joys of raising their own food. Once an interest in gardening is sparked, it will bring a lifetime of rewards.

SELECTION OF A GARDEN SITE

Choosing the garden site must be done carefully with consideration given to: 1) access to water, 2) sunlight—observe the site and make sure it gets at least six hours of sunlight per day, 3) soil drainage—don't put your garden in the lowest part of an area where water will collect and sit; make sure the water has somewhere to go.

CHILDREN AND TOOLS

Try to involve the children in as much of the soil preparation as possible. We've found that they love to dig and are able to handle buckets and wheel- barrows full of soil and amendments. Younger ones must be instructed in how to use a shovel. Tool safety lessons are of the utmost importance. Teach the children to keep the tools down low, not flailing over their heads; to look behind them before they swing a tool, and to carry tools with metal ends near the ground. Spatial relationships must be well organized. Give each child an area to work in and make sure there is adequate supervision—one adult per five children is a good ratio. We found the children to have varying attention spans for digging, according to age and interest. Have an alternate activity ready for them as they tire of digging. In general, children love to do active work and will enjoy this step in preparing the garden.

PLANTING A SPRING GARDEN

Spring is the time of year when renewal occurs. Billowy, black and white clouds blow through the

valley. Torrential rains fall and within ten minutes the sun is shining again. Brilliant pink blossoms contrast with deep emerald greens. Now is the perfect time to plant a spring salad garden. Children love carrots, onions, lettuce and even spinach if they have grown the vegetables themselves and are able to harvest them.

During the school year container gardens were planted at two schools. At the other school a nearby community garden site was used for the spring garden. ____The idea of planting a spring salad garden was hit upon because we wanted the children to experience the whole process from working the soil to eating the vegetables.

We started in the schools about the last week of March and the first week of April. We went to each school twice a week, taking different classrooms at varying times. We worked with the children from 30 to 45 minutes. If a special speaker was scheduled, the sessions might be up to 90 minutes. The time period was just right. Too long a time period caused the children to lose interest. We tried to make all activities something they could get involved in.

Touch, taste and smell became very important in our projects. The children also loved to take things home whether it was a package of seeds or a coleus cutting. Enthusiasm is the key word when teaching gardening. If you are excited and interested in your projects, the children will feel the same way. You don't have to be an expert, just willing to learn and grow along with the children.

The first day in the schools consisted of talking about what plants need to grow and the different types of soil. What do plants need to grow? The children's hands really shot up with this question. Answer: water, sun, air, good soil, food and most of all, love. For the container gardens, we worked with small groups of children. Each of us took five or so children, and broke into our groups and broke into our groups to do the different projects. We had the children name their group after a vegetable. They got very creative: The Onion Angels, The Delicious Nine and the Four Seasons were just a few. Once the groups were named we went into the garden site to work the soil and out to the boxes to fill them with soil, leaf mold, worm castings, wood ashes and compost. Once this was done, seeds were planted.

The children enjoyed the planting tremendously. As we planted, we explained how deep to plant, what vegetables like each other, how to water, and how to tell the different types of seeds. Once everything was planted, the children watered. A watering schedule was set up in each classroom where two children from each room took responsibility for watering all the newly planted area; who watered changed weekly. Most of the watering was done by mother nature, but the children checked the gardens daily (especially the container ~ gardens which dry out much faster). The children were thrilled by the daily changes that occurred in the gardens.

The gardens thrived, probably in part due to all the attention bestowed upon them. The children were very protective of their gardens. We had one case of vandalism—luckily whoever did it didn't pull up all the plants. The children replanted the area and we all had a lesson on respect for all living things. The gardens grew lush and healthy. The last day at each school was salad day. The children harvested the lettuce, onion, peas, spinach, beets, carrots and radishes we had all grown. We had huge bowls of salad. What wasn't eaten was taken home or given to the cafeteria. Salad day was a rewarding experience for all of us.

PLANTING A SUMMER GARDEN

By the time June rolls around everyone is tired of the rain and ready for some hot summer weather. Gardeners are especially anxious for this to happen so they can plant all those delicious summer vegetables. During the summer months we worked with three schools, establishing three summer garden sites on or near the schools. The summer garden project worked with children from the different summer programs at each school.

Gardening during the summer can be a problem—once the vegetables are planted who will be responsible for watering and weeding? Summer vegetables such as corn, beans, tomatoes, potatoes and watermelon can all be planted in early June, so the children will be able to do the planting. A teacher, parent or community volunteer would ideally take care of the garden during

the summer, harvesting the produce. If the children helped plant the garden, chances are they will return to check on it, especially if they get to taste a cucumber or take a flower home. We worked at each garden site twice a week with different groups of children, about an hour with each one. Summer is a much more relaxed time of year, so gardening can be a really fun time making hand-squeezed lemonade on hot days or filling a tub with water for the kids to splash around in. However, the turnover rate with the children will be much higher due to vacations. During the school year, you pretty much have a captive audience. So don't get worried if you have only a few children, so long as the interest is there, that's all that counts.

Our raised beds were intensively planted, so we wasted no space. We planted the seeds about half as far apart as what the directions called for, but followed directions closely on how deep to plant each kind of seed. If you are interested in intensive methods of gardening, many books are available. Once the seeds are out of the ground and established, you can have the children thin. Make sure they know the difference between weeds and new sprouts. Thin to the hardiest plants. We left our plants fairly close together, but made sure they weren't choking each other out in competition for space and light. Watering is very important when the seedlings are young. One drought can wipe out your entire bed. Children like to water, but be careful how they do it or else all the seeds will be uncovered or washed out of the area. A gentle sprinkle seems to work best. When the seeds have become hardy and stronger, watering should be reduced to a thorough soaking once a week (put a container out to catch the water; if you collect an inch of water, you have collected enough). Infrequent, shallow watering causes a shallow root system.

Weeding doesn't have to be boring. Children don't mind weeding if it is only for a short time. Let them do as much as they want, never force them. We found the best way for a child to weed was by hand. Using a hoe was too awkward for the children and it was too easy for them to slice delicate roots. Once on the ground next to the plants, they could really observe what an active place the garden is. While weeding, we also watched for harmful and helpful insects.

The garden during the summer is an excellent place to study nature. Have the children keep a garden notebook on what was done in the garden: what insects were found, if anything had to be replanted, and how the different vegetables grew. If possible, take pictures of all the garden activities. Pictures are an excellent way to see the garden at different phases and it's fun for the children to see themselves working in the garden. Harvest time makes all the waiting worthwhile. Once a fresh cucumber is tasted or a tomato picked, all the efforts are worth it. The produce can be put back into the cafeteria, taken home by the children or used for a picnic potluck of garden-fresh produce.

Additional Resources

School Gardens, A Guide to Organic Gardening With Children, available without charge from Lane County Housing & Community Dev, 170 E 11th Ave. Eugene, OR 97401, (503) 687—3999.

Energy, Food and You, Inter-disciplinary curriculum guides, K-6 and 7-12. Focus on energy and nutrition. Contact Tony Angell, Office of Environmental Education, NW Section, c/o Shoreline Schools, NE 158th E 20th Ave NE, Seattle, WA 98155.

Vegetable Gardening for Classroom or Homestudy, \$2.95, Tom Able, Programs in Gen. Biology, WSU, Pullman, WA 99163, (509) 335-1628. Voc Ag curriculum Low Energy Agriculture also available.