

Encouraging a Love of the Outdoors through Gardening

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

Engaging children in the outdoors offers a multitude of benefits at any age: physical activity, development of self-esteem, reduced learning disability symptoms and enhanced socialization skills to name a few. In today's digital world, the need for children and youth to reconnect to the outdoors is growing. Think back to your own childhood—do you recall a specific memory in the outdoors that instilled a love of nature you still have today? That connection, however minute it may have felt at the time, has established itself as part of your being. You are not connected to nature by accident. You spent time in the outdoors—something today's youth are doing for a smaller fraction of time. If you love gardening and you have children or youth in your life, make it your mission to include them in your outdoor activities this summer. Maybe it's a neighbor's child, grandchildren on a weekend visit, or even your own teenager who shows no interest in gardening at the moment. Whoever it may be, you have the privilege to share your love of nature with the next generation through the act of gardening.



Gardening with Little Ones

Early childhood is a sensory experience and the garden has an abundance of stimuli awaiting exploration. Whether it's the taste of a sweet herb, the smell of a fragrant flower, the sight of a butterfly floating by, the touch of a smooth watermelon or hearing the buzz of bees humming about; the outdoors feeds all of our senses. Young children can participate in gardening in a variety of ways—they can get in the dirt and plant, have fun helping to water and join in on the harvest of produce. A simple online search can lead you to a plethora of garden-based arts and crafts or children's books just waiting to be brought to life by time spent outdoors. A backyard garden develops a child's confidence and patience while serving as an outdoor play area, allowing children to unwind and relax. By sharing outdoor experiences at an early age, we are shaping how nature is valued in young children's lives.

Gardening with School-age Children

Children in elementary and lower middle school grades can take on a role of ownership and responsibility in the garden. They can assist in selecting plants to grow and participate in regular maintenance. At this stage, you can incorporate mini-science lessons in your gardening activities—practice measuring and observing or basic plant and insect science. Pollinator gardens are great for school-age children. They have bright, fragrant blooms that attract butterflies, bees and other insects that can spark new curiosities. Vegetable gardens are another great choice because children get excited about being able to eat what they have grown (don't we all?) and they can be involved in the entire process from planting to food preparation. By leading a child outdoors, you are giving them hands-on learning opportunities, positive bonding experiences and nurturing their mind, body and soul.

Gardening with Tweens & Teens

Most tweens and teens today are connected to the digital world at all times, so rather than fighting the idea, learn to intertwine technology with the outdoors. Birdwatching, insect and plant identification, nature observation journals and various gardening apps can be downloaded to your teen's device depending their interests. Ask your tween to show you gardening ideas or recipes on Pinterest to inspire them to participate. Give them the reins when it comes to design and plant selection—if not for the entire garden, at least for a piece they can call their own. Check out a local farmer's market, participate in a community garden, or find a way to share your harvest with others in need as a way to connect what you are doing at home with the world at large. Working in the garden teaches life skills in growing food and caring for land while increasing self-understanding, interpersonal relationship skills, the ability to work with others and cultural awareness. Designing and maintaining a landscape or garden spawns an attitude of environmental stewardship. Getting outside is rejuvenating and restful and yields an opportunity to unplug for a while, something both you and your teen could benefit from.

Reaping the Harvest

Whether you're spending time in the garden with a toddler granddaughter or a teenage son, prepare to harvest the bounty of time well spent—growing in your relationship with one another while making memories throughout a growing season. Make plans now to empower the youth in your life with the experience of gardening. By taking the time and opportunity to explore the natural world through gardening with the next generation, you are instilling a love and gratitude for nature that will carry on for years to come. More ideas at: <https://www.pinterest.com/nearboretum/kids-outdoors/>.

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