

Creating a Kid's Garden

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

During this past holiday season, an article was released showing the top five toys that no kids should live without—toys that fit any budget and work for a variety of ages. One of these toys was DIRT! Yes, you heard me right... DIRT! It's great for parents because dirt is free and can be found everywhere. It might not make it on a kid's list, but it is a must-have outside toy.

Kids can have a lot of fun with dirt. Digging, building, making piles, creating mudpies, looking for worms—dirt is a versatile toy. They can play alone, with friends, with parents. Kids have a natural sense of wonder, especially young children, and when playing in the dirt, they use their imagination. In this busy world of iPods, Wii's, and cellphones, it is a challenge to get kids excited about being outside. When given the opportunity to play in the dirt, they become engaged in nature, are physically active and their creativity is unleashed. One day they can pretend to be an archaeologist digging for artifacts and the next, a detective searching for signs of animals— tracks, holes and buried acorns.

One of the best ways to connect kids to dirt is to grow a vegetable garden. Gardens can be grown anywhere, from conventional garden boxes and planters to a kiddie pool, old sandbox or even an old claw-foot bathtub. Involve kids in the design of the garden. In planning the garden space, remember that little feet need areas to walk on. Create a few paths and boundaries so their hard work won't be trampled on. They can use the paths to kneel in when they are working in the garden space.

Another important part of garden design is creating a compost pile nearby. Compost can be added to gardens to create healthy soil. Compost can be made up of dried leaves, grass clippings, newspaper, food scraps from the kitchen, weeds and coffee grounds. Wetting it down and turning it will allow water and air to break it down and turn it into dark, nutrient-rich soil. For more information on composting and how to get kids started, visit www.thegardenofoz.org/composting101.asp.

After designing and creating your garden space, give kids a section of the garden and let them plant. Seeds do not have to be planted in rows. Let kids be creative, planting in a pattern that suits them. This will create a very unique space, full of wonder for everyone. Do, however, encourage them to plant the seeds the recommended distances from one another to allow them to succeed.

During the growing season, kids will keep busy by transplanting, pulling weeds, watering plants and mulching with compost. They will watch with curious eyes as seeds sprout, plants grow and vegetables appear. Harvesting crops is a great reward for all their hard work. Most kids lack enthusiasm for eating veggies, but when the veggies come from their own garden, suddenly they taste great! At the end of the gardening season, leftover plants and vegetables can be added to the compost pile for next year's garden.

While in the garden, kids will begin to notice nature all around them. Birds, butterflies, worms, rabbits, and other animals will become frequent visitors. The garden will become a special place for a kid, a place to call their own.



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