

Plants for Children's Gardens

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

Getting children outside to explore nature in their own backyard is a great thing—but how can adults encourage it? One way is to take a look at how the space is designed. While adults may value a landscape for its aesthetic appeal or tidiness, kids primarily want to discover new things and have hands-on interaction. To plan a kid-friendly yard, pay less attention to appearances and focus more on opportunities for learning and play.

Plant selection can play a big role in stimulating the senses and attracting interesting wildlife. Native plants are especially good for bringing in fascinating insects, birds and other animals; and they teach a child something about the region where they live. Plants with flashy flowers, fuzzy heads, seedpods, smelly leaves, shiny seeds, tasty fruits or sticky sap are great choices. Fruits, vegetables and herbs are another terrific option and a reminder of where their food comes from.

No matter what plants you choose, the more variety and the more options for interest and interaction, the better. Here are some plants that can help foster curiosity, inspiration and discovery:

- **Beebalm, Helen's flower** and **blanket flower** have showy blooms that attract insects and leave behind extra-puffy seed balls.
- **Milkweed** is an insect and butterfly magnet that has sticky, milky sap, flower clusters and big pods full of silky seed tufts that are easily carried with the breeze.
- **Mountain mint** and **wild onion** flowers attract pollinators and have aromatic foliage that can be eaten or rubbed for a smelly experience.
- **Prairie smoke, fremont's clematis** and **pasqueflower** are less than a foot high, which makes it easy for kids to ogle their pretty flowers and puffy seedheads that look like wisps of smoke.
- **False indigo** is a Great Plains native with dramatic spring flower spikes that give way to plump seedpods perfect for rattling.
- **Coneflower** is good for wildlife and has flowers that resemble big, purple daisies. Its fat, pointed seedheads are exciting for little fingers to touch.
- Prairie grasses like **bluestem, grama** and **lovegrass** are year-round sensory plants with irresistibly soft seedheads and wispy blades.
- **Wild plum, chokecherry, American hazelnut** and **currant** are edible shrubs relished by wildlife that make good forts and hiding places.

Don't forget trees. It's great to have at least one or two big ones in the yard for climbing and for shade on hot days:

- **Black walnut** and **northern pecan** have big, edible nuts and attract wildlife.
- **Oaks** produce acorns, and more than 500 species of caterpillars feed on the oaks.
- **Northern catalpa** has huge flower plumes in long "cigar-like" seedpods.
- **Weeping willow** is a childhood favorite that can turn into a "living fort."
- **Buckeye** has big flowers and huge, shiny seeds for kids or wildlife.
- **Black cherry** and **persimmon** have fruits that attract insects and birds.
- **Weeping mulberry** has berries to eat and places to hide.
- **Crabapple, magnolia** and **tree lilac** are smaller trees that offer bold masses of beautiful, fragrant flowers.
- **Pawpaw** and **serviceberry** are small in size and they produce edible, yummy fruits.
- **Pussy willow** attracts wildlife and has huge, fuzzy buds and flowers.
- **Ponderosa pine** has big pinecones for gathering.
- **Eastern white pine**, with its soft needles, is good for climbing.

For touch, plant: wooly thyme, fern, artemisia, porcupine grass, yarrow and sensitive plant. For smell: Koreanspice viburnum, peony, lilac, sage, lavender, thyme and oregano. For sound: Kentucky coffeetree, cottonwood, aspen and lotus. For flowers: sunflower, columbine, hydrangea, hardy hibiscus, clematis, liatris and bulbs. For vegetables: cherry tomatoes, pumpkins, purple carrots, striped beets and rainbow chard.

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