

Dig In! Tips for Creating a Garden for Kids



Getting children outside to explore nature is easier when the landscape invites discovery. While adults may value a yard for its appearance, kids are more interested in hands-on experiences, exploration and play. Creating a kid-friendly garden means focusing less on tidiness and more on opportunities to learn, investigate and interact with the natural world.

Plant selection can help spark curiosity and engage the senses. Native plants are especially valuable because they attract insects, birds and other wildlife while helping children connect with the natural heritage of their region. Look for plants with colorful flowers, fuzzy seedheads, interesting seedpods, fragrant foliage, edible fruits or unusual textures. The more variety and opportunities for interaction, the better.

Here are some plants that can inspire curiosity, creativity 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 get a close-up view of their pretty flowers and puffy seedheads that look like wisps of smoke.

False indigo has 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, **while weeping willow** is a childhood favorite that can turn into a "living fort."

Buckeye has big flowers and huge, shiny seeds, while **black cherry and persimmon** fruits attract insects and birds.

Weeping mulberry has berries to eat and places to hide, while 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 and **eastern white pine**, with its soft needles, is good for climbing.



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