

GUIDE TO GARDENING WITH KIDS



YOU MAY BE A GREAT GARDENER OR HAVE A LOT OF EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH KIDS, BUT COMBINING THE TWO CAN POSE NEW CHALLENGES! THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO MAKE YOUR TIME SPENT IN THE GARDEN WITH KIDS MORE COMFORTABLE AND SUCCESSFUL.

GOALS: The garden is a great place to practice observation skills, working safely together, compassion towards all living things, using tools safely and responsibly, trying new things and supporting others in doing the same.

Things to teach:

- how to recognize different plants
- plant anatomy and function
- how to plant, from seed to transplant
- why spacing matters and the benefits of inter-planting
- what plants need to grow and how they can get what they need
- how plants make food
- soil science
- how to have fun getting dirty
- bugs (friends & foes)
- how to weed efficiently and effectively

WHAT TO EXPECT

They don't want to leave

It is common for students to resist returning to class after planting and to ask if they can work longer. Be ready to promise students more opportunities to work in the garden.

Sitting on the side lines

Rather than forcing reluctant students to participate, allow them to sit by the side and observe. Often they see and hear how much fun the other students are having and choose to join in.

They will get dirty

Remind students or send a note home to parents to let them know about upcoming garden days so that they can be sure to dress appropriately for outdoor work. Always be sure to have students clean up after gardening whether it be stomping and scraping the mud off of their shoes or washing their hands.

Worms and other critters

Anticipate an excited reaction to garden critters and be prepared to explain the important role of worms and other creatures in the soil. Students are generally fascinated to learn about them to the extent that finding a worm or beetle can become a highlight activity and a very "teachable moment."

It won't be perfect

School gardens are learning tools rather than meticulously tended landscapes. Let students do as much of the work as they can because their involvement creates ownership and learning. You may very well have crooked rows of radishes coming up in the middle of the tomatoes but that is okay!

GROUP MANAGEMENT

Taking an entire class into the garden can be daunting. Appropriate planning makes all the difference in ensuring that the experience is exciting and constructive rather than a free for all.

Know your limits

The size of your garden is a key factor in determining how many students it is appropriate to take into the garden. Some gardens are simply too small to accommodate a whole class for anything more than a tour. Identify spaces just outside of the garden that could be used for other activities such as starting seeds or journaling if necessary. Don't commit to taking more students than you have space or work for.

Divide up the class into small groups

Whether taking a whole class into the garden, half of a class, or just a small group, it is important that students have adequate instruction and supervision. If managing a whole class, it would be ideal to have at least three adults who could each manage a group.

Set up stations so students can rotate through different activities

It is best to have activities available that students can do relatively independently so that volunteers can manage a group with ease. For example, one group can plant with the Garden Educator while another group weeds and the third works on a math worksheet that involves measuring and answering questions about plant growth. Try to choose activities that are located far enough apart that students won't be distracted by other groups.

Establish clear rules of behavior

Go over garden rules (see Garden Rules) at the beginning of each garden session until they become routine. It may help to model appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Praise those who follow the rules and be sure to remind students of rules if they are violated. Implement a strike system if necessary and feel free to send students back to class or ask them to sit out.

Have a designated space in the garden where students can "take a break"

Use a call and response system to get attention

Things can get chaotic and noisy in the garden, so a call and response will help you get the students' attention quickly. For example, you can call out "Straw!" and the kids respond "Berry!" and immediately quiet down for instructions. Be sure to practice this multiple times so that it works.

Use volunteers

As soon as you know when you will have a class in the garden, recruit volunteers through teachers, your garden committee, and the CTF Volunteer Newsletter. It is best to have at least 3 adults with one class.

Leave adequate time for cleanup and closure

Take the last 10 minutes to clean up, put away tools, and have a quick reflection. This is a good time to reward students for behavior, ask for any favorite moments, and follow up on any learning objectives.

Allow for teachable moments.

Students will be distracted from time to time which is not always bad. Exploring and discovering can improve observation skills and inspire the students to care for the garden.

Plan for extra time

Always be sure to have some extra activities in your back pocket in case you finish early. Ideas include: looking for worms, drawing, journaling, weeding, garden games, etc.

GARDEN RULES

Encourage students to help identify appropriate behavior while in the garden but be sure that the following are included. We remind children of each of these guidelines every time we're in the garden:

Be a good garden guest

Be kind

Be safe

Work together

Try new things

General Garden Rules

Keep your walking feet while in the garden.

Stay on the garden paths.

Ask before using a tool or picking anything from the garden.

Respect each other and the plants, animals and tools in the garden.

Keep open minds.

Water is a resource, not a toy.

Harvest only what we eat.

Rules for Tools

Tools are not toys or weapons and should only be used for their intended purpose.

The blade of a tool should always point down and should never be brought higher than your bellybutton.

Tools should be cleaned and put away after each use.

GARDENING TIPS

Don't worry, you don't have to have a green thumb to garden with kids. Just follow these simple tips:

Watering

How? If watering cans aren't available, use old milk jugs or juice bottles with holes poked in the lid. Have a couple 5 gallon buckets filled with water so kids can refill them as needed. Instruct kids to water at the base of the plant like a gentle rain rather than a flood.

When? If possible, water in the morning before it gets warm. To check if the garden needs to be watered, poke a finger into the soil. The soil should be moist at least 3-4 inches deep. If the soil is dry, give it a good soaking. For larger plants, water less often but more thoroughly. This encourages the roots to grow deeper into the soil

where they won't dry out. However, seeds and young seedlings should be watered more frequently because their roots don't go as deep.

Weeding

Why? Explain to kids that gardens are meant for growing specific plants. Weeds are plants that we don't want to grow and they steal water, nutrients, and sunlight from the plants that we are trying to grow.

How? Do your best to pull the ENTIRE weed out of the ground, including the root. A lot of weeds can re-grow if the root is left intact. Use hand tools if necessary. If you are unsure if a plant is a weed, be safe and leave it.

Planting

Planting with a lot of students in a small space can get kind of crowded. Consider having students work on a self directed task and pull individuals to plant as there is space.

Seeds: Seed packets do an excellent job of explaining how deep and far apart you should place the seeds. Have students hold up their "planting hand" (the hand they write with) and their "seed holding hand" and instruct students to only plant one seed at a time with their planting so you don't end up with clumps of seedlings. Flour can be used as a marker for planting. Make sure seeds aren't planted too deep (generally 2 or 3 times the seed width) or they won't germinate properly. Also, if the seeds are a couple years old, it's a good idea to put two seeds in each hole because they might not all be viable. Cover seeds with soil and water gently. Keep top layer of soil moist until seedlings are a couple inches tall. Start seeds in the classroom when possible so kids can carefully monitor watering and watch the seeds begin to grow!

Plants: A plant should be placed into the ground at roughly the same soil level as in the pot. Common exceptions include brassicas (broccoli, kale, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts) and nightshades (tomatoes and peppers) which should be planted up to the bottom true leaves for better support.

Harvesting

- Check with the Garden Educator before harvesting anything.
- Harvesting can be fun, but be sure to only harvest what will be eaten.
- Teach children to harvest using both hands so we don't accidentally pull the plant up by the roots (unless it is a beet).
- Try to harvest on the same day you eat the produce
- Harvesting from the following common plants actually encourages more production and prevents the plants from bolting (going to seed and turning bitter): peas, beans, lettuce, spinach, arugula, kale, chard, basil

Composting

Compost needs the same things we humans do—light (warmth), air, water, and food.

Light: Compost piles should not be in a very damp and shady location. The decomposition process will be faster in warmer months and will slow down in the winter.

Air: Turning the compost once a week will keep the decomposition process going by putting new “food” and air into the center, where much of the breakdown occurs. The goal is to get the outer and top layers into the bottom and middle of the pile.

Water: Compost should ideally be the dampness of a wrung out sponge. If it has been very dry or you are adding dry materials, give the compost a bit of water.

Food: If your pile is near a building or animals are a concern, do not add food to the pile, only garden trimmings. Have kids rip up the trimmings into small pieces so that they break down quicker.

Bucklin-Sporer, Arden and Rachel Kathleen Pringle. *How to Grow a School Garden: A Complete Guide for Parents and Teachers*. Portland, OR: Timber Press Inc., 2010.

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