Growing Kids Who Love Gardening

MJ Pavelko Snyder, Frederick County Master Gardener

If you love to grow things so will your kids – right? Not necessarily…….It can help to match garden tasks to your child's developmental stage or age to ensure the best chance of raising a child who loves nature.

The developmental task for infants is to form a secure attachment to their parents and to begin to trust the environment. Translation: carry your infant with you when you go outdoors, pointing and naming the flowers, trees, birds, and other wildlife. Consider gardening with your baby wrapped in your baby backpack or snuggly. Talk to them about what you're growing; let them feel and smell the textures of soil, flower petals/leaves, and rocks. The best learning offers a multi-sensory experience. Babies become naturally curious and wonderful observers by eight months of age. Even in winter you can sit by a window and watch birds at a feeder, imitate their sounds, and name their colors. Don't hesitate to use the proper names of birds and other wildlife, as your baby will be exposed to the rich world of nature language.

By toddlerhood, from ages 1 1/2 to 3 years of age, children begin to develop a sense of independence. They become increasingly aware of themselves and the world around them, assisted by the emergence of movement and language. Gardening and nature activities for toddlers are endless. Cause and effect activities are great entertainment for toddlers. Consider growing a "picking" garden, allowing your toddler to pick their way through the plant world. Bite-size veggies and fruits will be a joy for your child to pick and sort at this age, filling bowls of different sizes and colors. Give them "child-size" tools to help you dig, shovel, and fill pots with soil. Water play in the garden helps your plants grow as well as your toddler's happiness.

Preschoolers, ages 3-5, are the true "master gardeners". They delight in "doing it my own". Consider giving your child their own garden space at this age, with their own small-sized tools. Let them lead the way, despite their lack of gardening know-how. They will sow seeds their own way - you can follow behind and correct any mistakes. The important world of pretend play gels at this stage. Consider building a "green" teepee from bamboo poles. Plant pole beans, moon flowers, or mini pumpkins to make this a fun play area. A sunflower house is ideal also. Plant sunflower seeds in a square block, leaving room for a "door". Grow morning glories, moon flowers, or peas next to the sunflowers to weave around them and ultimately form a roof. Help your child build a "fairy, elf," or other mini-garden, where they can bring their stuffed animal friends to visit and play. Catching butterflies and fireflies is endless fun for kids. To learn how to grow a butterfly garden, visit the website of Frederick County Master Gardener, Jim Gallion, at www.gardeningadventures.com.

The ages of six to eight emphasize competence, mastery, and peer relationships. Your child may now prefer to play with friends, rather than be with you in the garden. If you can focus playdates on outdoor activities, you can keep the love of nature alive in your child. Let your child dig and plant with their friends on their own. Forget that they might build a beaver dam in your newly prepared garden bed, plant pumpkin seeds next to your rose bushes, or sow maple seedlings with your favorite vegetables. Encourage your child to join you in the best of gardening tasks – digging, picking fruits, and pulling pests off your plants. This is also an age where kids love to help build and create new structures in the garden. Making raised beds or window boxes together is an ideal way to develop your child's sense of competence. Building bird houses, toad abodes, worm bins, bee condos, and other wildlife habitats are also fun at this age. See the "National Wildlife Foundation's website at"www.greenhour.org" for the details on how to create these habitats and learn about novel ways to engage kids in the outdoors.

Mastery and proficiency continue to develop from ages nine through twelve, with increased emphasis on the social world. If your child has come to love nature and the outdoors, find a group or club focused on this. Scouting, 4-H, camping, raising pets or farm animals is now an ideal way to encourage your child to be in touch with the environment. With garden tasks, be careful to not make it seem like work. This is a great time to bring science learning into the garden. Let your child test the soil using store-bought kits. Create a "worm bin" and/or "compost bin" to help them understand how nature can create the best soil to grow in. You can show your child how to create the best habitat to protect the "Chesapeake Bay" - right in your own yard. You can learn how to make your backyard a "Baywise" certified habitat by visiting the internet site: www.frederick.umd.edu/MG/BayWise.cfm

By age thirteen, it will be a rare child who wants to work in the garden without the exchange of dollars and cents. If you have one who does – celebrate! You've grown a gardener. If not, don't despair. As a child, I was one who hated to garden and shrieked at things slimy or green. I turned the garden corner by age 30, and have been a passionate grower ever since…..though I do still cringe at moving critters.

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For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the University of Maryland Extension, (301) 600-1596, or visit http://www.frederick.umd.edu/. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.

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