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Your garden and your family: Food, health and learning for a lifetime.

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You’ve heard it all: your family will be healthier by eating more meals prepared at home. Some people say you should buy only organic products, forgo drive-through food and never drink soda again. You know that children should drop the electronics, get some exercise and spend some time together as a family. But you’re busy, the kids are busy and you’re faced with too many *must-do-its*. Is there anything close to a solution? **Absolutely!** And it’s right in your back yard. Start a small garden, get dirty and grow some health and togetherness.

How do families benefit from gardening together? Research shows that families who garden together enjoy better health and well-being:

- Children eat more vegetables
- Gardening provides stress relief, relaxation and physical exercise
- Gardening together gives families a chance to spend quality time together outdoors¹
- Families form long-lasting bonds by working together for a common goal.

What’s this about togetherness and family bonding? As Illinois State University professor Karen Stephens points out, “children sometimes feel they’re on the low end of the family hierarchy. So the pride in contributing yummy vegetables or a blooming centerpiece for the dinner table bolsters self-esteem. By sharing ... they develop a sense of cooperation, loyalty, responsibility and unity.”²

Adults benefit from gardening, too. Growing your vegetables provides healthy exercise (240 calories/hr) and might start a hobby you’ll enjoy when you retire. Many gardeners feel that the feelings of accomplishment, self-sufficiency and security accompanying a successful garden are other significant rewards of gardening.⁴ Plus, you’ll eat better: in a study performed for the National Institutes of Health, the frequency of adult vegetable consumption was higher in the home gardeners than in the non-gardeners.³

Children learn valuable skills working in a garden that translate academically and personally:

- Math:** Basic arithmetic (+/-*), measurement, weights and measures
- Art:** Design, color, structure
- Responsibility:** Planning, irrigation, staking
- Patience:** Seasons, growth cycles
- Science:** Conservation, insect identification, plant growth, water quality, pollinators, birds, biodiversity
- Record keeping:** Planting dates, growth, harvesting
- Language:** Journals, signage
- History:** Early American planting, vegetables grown around the world
- Health:** Harvesting and cooking
- Cooperation:** Shared tasks, shared responsibilities
- Leadership:** Decision-making, assigning tasks & roles
- Communication:** Integrating ideas, sharing concepts

What makes children enjoy gardening?

Children are natural scientists. They love discovering new things and they enjoy experimenting. Some children require more structure while others are content to try their own ideas without support, but every child shares a need for four basic development skills, and all four can be found in abundance in the garden:

Mastery. Marcia Eames-Sheavly, a senior Extension Associate at Cornell University³, interviewed a panel of 4-H youth to answer questions posed by 4-H and garden educators. When asked what drives them crazy about the adults in their lives, one teen unexpectedly responded, "You're all so terrified to see us fail. We can handle it! Let us work it out!" It's important to show children a technique, then step back.

Belonging. In this busy culture of scheduled activities, it's easy to forget that more than ever, hanging out with each other has tremendous value. When the whole family is in the garden together, it gives you time to develop closer relationships.

Generosity. Working and learning in a garden reinforces gestures of thoughtfulness and asks young people to take responsibility for others. If your garden has extra produce, sharing it with food banks or neighbors can lead to a life-long interest in community service.

Power. Often, the people who are the most enthusiastic about gardens and gardening are adults. Ms. Eames-Sheavly tell us that "A major thrust of our recent research-extension focus has been identifying children's level of participation in community garden-based projects, and exploring ways to better engage them in decision-making. When it comes to gardening, there are many decisions to make, and before making any, we should consider whether children could or should make those decisions.

Ideas for Gardening with Children

Adults often find it challenging to share power with young people in garden planning, design, implementation and maintenance. Nonetheless, we should include children in discussions, encourage their input, and give them responsibility.

Never *tell* children something if you can *show* them

Young kids have a very short attention span. Make sure that you have lots of options available so they can get started immediately and stay busy. Digging holes seems to hold endless fascination

Instant gratification helps a lot. Plant radishes even if you don't like them — they sprout in three or four days

Remember, getting dirty is an integral part of growing up

When giving out supplies to several kids, try to keep seeds, tools, and other equipment as similar as possible to avoid the inevitable squabbles

Try to add responsibility and ownership to projects ("Quincy is in charge of the wheelbarrow today"). Try pairing up older kids with younger ones.

Sources:

1. North Carolina Cooperative Extension: Gardening Holds Many Benefits for Families and Community, Feb. 2010.
2. Stephens, Karen: Children Reap a Bushel of Benefits From Outdoor Gardening. Illinois State University Parent Exchange, 2007.
3. Cornell University Garden Based Learning: <http://blogs.cornell.edu/garden/>
4. Growing Vegetables in Home Gardens. <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/PB901.pdf>
5. Impact of a community gardening project on vegetable intake, food security and family relationships: a community-based participatory research study. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22194063>