

Feed Kids' Creativity With Fun, Child-Friendly Garden Ideas

(ARA) - Planting season has arrived, a prime time to share your love for nature with your entire family and spend quality time together in the garden. Getting kids excited about gardening is simple if they are involved with the planning process which promotes a fertile imagination.

Gardening is fun at any age. With a little help, even toddlers and preschoolers enjoy planting their own little posie or veggie patch.

Choose a theme

Kids love a theme - from birthday parties to bedroom decor. Capitalize on that by together planning and planting a themed garden. Center the theme on foods they already like, such as pizza or salsa, so the fun and learning experi-

ence of gardening combines with eating and enjoying what they've grown.

What you plant in your pizza garden will depend on your family's preferences, but tomatoes, purple and yellow peppers, oregano and basil are staples for any pie. For your salsa garden, choose tomatoes, red and green bell peppers, red onion, cilantro and hot peppers.

A butterfly garden is another theme that appeals to children who love flowers, not to mention bees. Planting sun-loving flowers like bee balm, purple coneflower, black-eyed susan and butterfly weed are sure to attract plenty of butterflies. With luck, the adult butterflies will leave eggs behind, so children will witness the insect's amazing life cycle firsthand.

Give them the tools

Brightly colored small spades, troweled trowels and, of course, a watering can are beginner gardening staples. Equip children with tools that fit their smaller hands and appeal to their sense of adventure.

ScottsMiracle-Gro and Peachtree Playthings have teamed up to offer a line of gardening kits that incorporate Miracle-Gro products that have been helping adults grow successful gardens for decades. The 3-in-1 Gardening Set includes containers, Miracle-GroGo-Mix, seed packets, instructions and a watering can, and helps kids tap into the fun of gardening while doing it on their own.

Children can start flowers or vegetables from seed using a Miracle-Gro Kids

ModPots, Kids Terrarium or single-plant Grow-A-Plant set. Once plants have grown their second set of leaves, replant in the garden and watch them flourish.

Dig in

Whether your family garden will be in the backyard or in containers on the balcony, porch or patio, involving everyone makes gardening enjoyable. Start by having kids select a garden site. Choose a place that is easily accessible with adequate sunlight - six hours a day - and good drainage. Children like to choose what they want to plant. Often, they pick well-loved vegetables and flowers such as pumpkins, potatoes, daisies or geraniums. Feel free to suggest easy-to-grow new plant ideas like

zucchini, purple peppers, dill, chives or tomatoes.

During the summer and fall months, as your family comes up with ideas for next year's garden, be adventurous and explore developed gardens where your children can see what the adult plants look like. Cut out pictures and have kids make a garden collage of ideas. Visit friends and family gardens, tour a botanical or community garden or simply stroll through the local nursery. Bring along a plant identification book and journal to write down the names, colors, scents and if appropriate, taste of the plant and its fruits you like. Your children will come up with plenty of planning activities for the long winter months as they begin dreaming of spring, planting and tasting once again.

Maintain Healthy Soil Through the Season

A lush lawn and garden is a part of many homeowners' dream home. A lawn that emanates green and a garden that's home to succulent vegetables is desirable to homeowners across the country.

Of course, such lawns and gardens take time and effort, and a host of factors will determine if a lawn and garden is something homeowners should be proud of or ashamed of. One such factor is soil health. Healthy soil helps deliver food and water to plants, allowing them to thrive and add aesthetic appeal to homes. To maintain healthy soil, homeowners should consider the following tips.

* Get the soil tested. When addressing soil health, it's best to first get the soil tested. A soil test will show which type of soil you have as well as its makeup and structure, and just how good or bad it currently is. Such tests can also reveal if the soil is missing any essential nutrients. Some soil tests can be conducted by novice green-thumbs, while others are best left to the local agricultural bureau. These tests are a good investment, as they will remove the guesswork from fertilizing. Without a soil test, many homeowners end up overdoing it when fertilizing, which can prove a costly mistake. Take a soil sample a few months before you plan to plant or landscape to give yourself enough time to apply the test's recommendations to your lawn and garden.

* Avoid wet soil. When soil is wet, don't walk or drive over it and keep the kids out of the yard. When wet soil is walked on or driven over, the soil gets packed down, pushing out air and making it more difficult and sometimes impossible for water to pass through the soil. That makes it hard for roots to grow.

* Use well-drained soil. Well-drained soil will dry fast and enable oxygen to reach the root zone, helping build stronger roots as a result. Plants with strong roots are more likely to survive severe weather.

* Use compost. Compost can prove very beneficial to soil health. Organic compost is typically loaded with nutrients that, upon maturity, feed the soil and promote soil health. Biodegradable items like grass clippings, leaves and even excess food like apple cores can strengthen the compost. Even worms, which break down compost quickly and add nutrients, can be a valuable addition to organic compost.

* Don't bash bacteria. Bacteria is often seen as a formidable foe, but some bacteria can actually promote healthy soil. Bacteria decompose plant matter, releasing the nutritive value into the soil, and can also break down chemical pesticides. So while bacteria is bad more often than it's beneficial, some bacteria are quite useful, particularly when it comes to healthy soil.

* Pests can be an ally to healthy soil. Some garden pests like mites, millipedes and centipedes are incorrectly assumed to be enemies of healthy soil. In fact, such pests can vastly improve soil health.

Take Care Of The Mower That Takes Care Of Your Lawn

(Family Features) — Regular lawn mower maintenance is vital to keeping this tool running well. These tips from the experts at TruGreen will help you take care of the workhorse of lawn care.

Sharpen the blade

The sharper the blade, the cleaner your mower will cut the grass, and the better your lawn will look. Dull blades can shred grass and cause discoloration at the tips.

If you don't have the time or the inclination to sharpen the blade yourself, pack up your mower (or carefully remove the mower blade) and take it to a repair shop or home improvement store. For the do-it-yourselfer, take a look at these general tips - for safety, always consult the owner's manual for instructions specific to your machine.

To sharpen a blade:

- Drain the gas and disconnect the spark plug.
- Clamp a piece of wood to the deck to keep the blade from turning.
- Turn the blade bolt counter clockwise to remove it. If there is resistance, apply some penetrating oil, wait 15 minutes and try again.
- Remove the blade and mark the bottom side so you can put it back on correctly.
- Clamp the blade in a bench vise and sharpen with a 10-inch mill file. Use long strokes and work from the center outward.

Use the same number of strokes on each side and keep the same angle.

• Balance the blade on a balance tool — it's an inexpensive pyramid-shaped tool that can be found in most hardware stores. If one side of the blade hangs lower than the other, grind off excess metal from the end of the blade - not from the part just sharpened.

• Reinstall blade. When you reinstall the mower blade, make sure you place it at the proper mowing height.

"Letting grass grow tall and then removing more than 1/3 of the leaf blade is called scalping and can damage the lawn," said Ben Hamza, Ph.D., director of technical operations at TruGreen. "Be careful not to mow grass extremely low as you can damage the lawn by cutting into the crowns of the plants."

TruGreen professionals recommend that you measure the grass plants after mowing a very small area, then adjust your mower as necessary. Optimal mowing height varies by type of grass. Experts suggest the following mowing heights, in inches:

- Common Bermuda grass - 1.0 to 1.5
- St. Augustine grass, Bahia grass - 3.0 to 3.5
- Zoysia grass - 1.0
- Rye grass, blue grass, fine fescue - 2.5 to 3.0
- Tall fescues - 2.5 to 3.0

Clean it up

Cleaning your lawn mower not only helps machine performance, it can minimize the spread of lawn disease.

• Empty the gas tank and disconnect the spark plug wire. It's possible for the mower to start on its own when the blade gets turned, which can result in serious injury.

• Rinse mower completely with a water hose from above. Aiming the hose at the side of the mower might get water into the air filter. Wash the outside with sudsy water and sponge. Rinse.

• Turn the mower on its side and clean off any built-up grass with your hands or a putty knife. Wash the underside with soapy water, then gently rinse.

• Let mower dry completely (about an hour).

Maintaining your lawn mower is essential to a lush, green lawn and complements the customized professional lawn, tree and shrub care services TruGreen provides. Taking these simple measures will make mowing easier and help your lawn look great.

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