



A CHILDREN'S GARDEN TO PLAN, PLANT AND PLAY IN

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When I was a young thing, I made ballerina dancing dolls from fuchsia flowers growing on a fence in the back yard of our home in San Francisco. Then came the delightful days of having stories read to me of "Peter Rabbit in Mr. McGregor's Garden" and "The Secret Garden." Alas, one splendid summer in Tennessee I was permitted to have a corner of Daddy's garden where *I planted anything I wanted*.

Should I have a wish, it would be for all children to have the experience of planning, planting and playing in their own garden. Taking ownership of a piece of ground and caring for it can be full of life lessons. The engagement of connecting with the environment while nurturing plants and sharing the bounty is a confidence builder. Not to mention "cultivating" a basic foundation and introduction to seeds, bugs, frogs, worms, birds and spiders.

For the experience to be successful and for it to last longer than a week or two, there are some fundamental guidelines which should be noted. No one wants to hear the audible sighs of adults lamenting, "It was a disaster, fruitless, useless and a total failure." So here we go, some general points:

- Place garden a short distance from the residence, near a water source and positioned to receive at least six hours of sun light.
- A fenced in area will certainly help in discouraging the four legged hungry guests.
- Start small, maybe an area of 10' x 10'.

Pretty much the same for an adult garden, wouldn't you say?

Gardeners, even young gardeners, need to plan, so gather seed catalogues, paper and pencil and draw out a plan. Draw in pathways, location of raised beds, water features, benches and such. Include a gate, table and stools, shade structure, paving stones, teepee and places to sit, lay or stand up-side down.

Keep it simple.

Make a table of two planks on a base of four tree stumps and stools made of leveled stumps painted bright colors (perhaps hand prints on the table top).

Pathways made of different colored pavers, round or square, leading from the entrance to the center area of the garden.

A tee-pee made of bamboo spread at the base large enough to become a covered tent with climbing beans (maybe two or three different cultivars).

A water feature can be as small as a medium size children's plastic swimming pool, sunken to a depth even with the soil and surrounded by flat stones.

A shade structure using PVC as the frame, with a height of as much as 5 feet and covered with burlap or shade cloth or vines, positioned over a piece of carpeting makes a nice nap nest or place to tell stories, read or just watch nature.

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Raised beds that are no larger than 4'x 4' are best for little ones and placed so they can work from all sides. Or maybe a garden planting area shaped like a wheel with "spokes" dividing the beds.

Be creative!

Unused lamp shades, painted bright colors, turned up-side down and filled with potting soil make wonderful planters and last for several years.

Broken, discarded clay pots and other containers make inviting places for frogs. Stack them and tuck them under large leafed plants.

Planting.

Select vegetables and flowers that are fast growers and have more than one use. As an example, fennel grows fast, takes little maintenance, taste like licorice (especially the seeds) and is a magnet to Lady Beetles.

Nasturtiums are a must with leaves and flowers that can be eaten. These grow abundantly and radiate cheer to the garden with their bright yellow and orange flowers.

Radishes are up from seed very quickly and teach the children of edibles growing under the soil as well as having them experience the taste of different greens in salads.

Sunflowers are always a hit, and come in all sizes. The seeds attract birds and flowers bring the honey bees and give a lesson of the turning of the flower's face towards the sun.

Not to be forgotten are cherry tomatoes, chives, parsley, strawberries, peas, stevia, borage, Shasta daisy, calendula, and lemon verbena.

Keeping in mind that the plants chosen will involve all senses, i.e., smell, touch, visual and taste.

Be sure to leave a small area for the compost pile. A small plastic garbage can with a lid and plenty of holes will be sufficient.

Teach early on that the plants pulled at the end of the season along with a hand full of worms makes a beautiful beginning for the next season.

A youth garden should be functional and fun, with an ownership. Create a sign such as "Paul's Plot", or "Jamie's Yummy Garden".

Allow the children the freedom of selecting placement and numbers of plants.

So what if all 25 seeds of sun flowers grow up to challenge the size of Jack's beanstalk? The garden will be a newsworthy article showing off its individual style.

I believe that the memories and lessons learned in planting and tending a garden will be held dear, and surely one day, they will tell their children about floating pea-pod boats in the bird-bath.

References:

"Youth Gardens" University of Illinois Extension, <http://urbanext.illinois.edu>
California School Garden Network, www.csgn.org

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