



Get your kids into gardening

Looking for ways to encourage your children to grow their own? Stephen Shirley reveals how quick-reward projects and colourful plants can help keep the little ones intrigued

Gardening with children is rewarding on many levels, perhaps the most cherished being that you'll get to share time and an interest with your loved ones. And by teaching them to grow their own, you'll be instilling in them an important skill that will surely benefit them as adults. What's more, children are far more likely to eat something they've grown themselves – so there's no better way to convince them to eat their 'five a day'!

If you want to get them involved on the plot, the first thing you'll need to do is ignite their interest with projects that yield 'instant' results, as children are naturally drawn to visibly fast results.

Once they're on board, you can start to mix in a few longer-term projects and introduce them to other fruit and veg, such as colourful croppers.

Sustaining interest

Don't rest on your laurels once your kids appear hooked on gardening. It's important to keep putting effort in, even if sometimes it seems to go completely unrewarded. One of the best ways to keep them coming back is to set aside an individual patch for each child. It may seem extravagant if room on your plot is at a premium, but it will help them to develop a sense of possessive pride for their own space, as well as a

PROJECT 1 Lettuce Letters

Considering most children turn their noses up at a bowl of salad, lettuce may not seem like an obvious first choice. But it's extremely fast growing, and if they pick and eat the young, sweet leaves, they may quickly realise what they're missing out on! Couple that with the excitement of spelling their initials, and you're on to a winner. All you need for this project is a packet of mixed lettuce seed (the various colours and leaf shapes will give added interest), a short length of bamboo cane and a watering can – within a few weeks, your little ones will be enjoying their own cut-and-come-again harvest.

Step-by-step:

- 1 Prepare the plot in advance, allowing a 40cm square for each letter in a suitable bed. Alternatively, for each letter fill one 30-40cm pot with compost. Help your children draw out a 1cm deep drill, using the bamboo cane, in the shape of their initials.
- 2 Assist your children in thinly sowing the lettuce seed into the drill. If they're very young you can make it easier for them to successfully sow thinly by pre-mixing the seed with a little dry sand. Help them to carefully cover the drill with soil or compost, without disturbing the seed.
- 3 Let them water the area (without flooding) and encourage them to check the watering every few days. Your kids will soon tell you when the seedlings emerge. Encourage your child to let them grow to around 8cm tall before helping to harvest the lettuce by trimming with scissors.

respect for everyone else's. Try not to dictate how they treat it. Curvy rows, soil castles and worm houses are all fine – at least they're out on the plot!

It's completely natural for a child to not want to work on his or her patch all of the time. Hours of weeding and digging won't appeal to many young ones, so accept that you'll end up doing the legwork when it comes to some of these more mundane tasks, while your child gets to do the more interesting bits! But if you garden on an allotment, lay down the rule that they can't go home after 10 minutes. Prepare for the inevitable cries of "I'm thirsty", "I'm hungry" and "I'm bored" by bringing appropriate drinks and snacks along (unless you're there to harvest) and consider keeping a box of garden toys in the shed. If part of their patch turns into a toy-car rally track, don't worry – at least they're still enjoy the outdoors.

Be prepared to spend a little money to fuel their enthusiasm. Kids love having their own set of proper child-sized garden tools, for example, and will find them easier and safer to use. They'll leave yours alone, too! Buy genuine scaled-down versions rather than toys. If you're purchasing seeds or plants, ask if there's anything they like the look of growing. Don't refuse a request just because it's not quite what you'd choose – after all, it's their patch, not yours!



Other fun projects

Build A Scarecrow

No child-friendly veg patch should be without a scarecrow. Kids love making them – especially if it's sporting clothes they have grown out of. Make a cross-shaped frame from stout bamboo canes or timber before 'dressing' this and stuffing with straw or hay.



Create An Insect House

These are easy and fun to construct. All you need is a few off-cuts of bamboo cane and a half log drilled with holes. You'll find plenty of simple designs on the internet. The resultant house will provide a haven for beneficial insects such as lacewings, ladybirds and solitary bees – as well as a never-ending source of wonder for the children.

PROJECT 2 | Halloween Pumpkin

This is a longer term project, but kids who have experienced Halloween, will love the prospect of being able to carve their own home-grown pumpkin. Ask your child whether they'd prefer to grow one or two big pumpkins or lots of small ones. Varieties such as 'Jack Be Little' are reliable croppers, producing upwards of 10 miniature fruits that are great for decorating with a black marker pen. They can also be hollowed out to make child-sized bowls, while the flesh can be used in soups, pies or risottos. For this project, you'll need pumpkin seeds, a 7cm pot for each seed (filled with fresh seed compost), and either a large (40cm) tub of compost or a square metre of prepared ground for planting out.

Step by step:

1 Help your children to sow the seeds individually in pots. They should be inserted with the blunt end point downwards into the compost, and the rounded or pointed end uppermost. Push in until they're out of sight. Have your child water them thoroughly, then germinate at 25C. Once the leaves develop, reduce the temperature to around 18-21C.

2 Continue growing on under protection until all fear of frost has passed (late May or June). Ask your children to help you plant them out into their final positions or containers. If the weather is still poor, protect the plants with a cloche or windbreak. Encourage your little ones to water them regularly and keep the ground free of weeds.

3 If you're growing large-fruited varieties, allow only one or two pumpkins to develop per plant. You can allow smaller-fruited types to mature their entire crop. For extra fun, help your child engrave their name into the skin of the young fruit – as it swells, so will the letters! Harvest the pumpkins when the foliage dies back or before mildew takes hold.



5 easy-grow veg for kids

1 Cress grows quickly enough to satisfy even the most impatient of youngsters! Help them draw a face on a used boiled egg shell, fill it with damp cotton wool and sow the seeds into it. In no time at all the small head will have a full complement of cress hair! Old egg boxes can be chopped into sections and glued together to become cress caterpillars.

2 French beans grow impressively speedily up cane and wigwam structures (be sure to top the supports with suitable eye protection), and can be picked and eaten fresh on the plot. And what child isn't filled with awe at the idea of recreating Jack and the Beanstalk? Runner beans can also be used, but make certain that your kids only eat the young pickings – tough and stringy older pods may put them off for good!



3 Beetroot is a relatively quick cropper. The seed is small enough for you to teach more precise sowing techniques, but large enough for tiny hands to manage. Later in the cycle, you'll be able to instruct them in the art of thinning, too. Kids love the sweet taste of oven-roasted beetroot chips.

4 Courgettes produce a vast number of fruits once they start cropping, and the speed at which they grow fascinates children. Grow a few round or yellow-fruited types for an interesting variety of shapes and colours. Young kids may not enjoy the harvest itself, but it's easy to hide in soups and pasta dishes.

5 Babycorn makes for a great addition to the school lunch box. It's much easier to grow than conventional sweetcorn, as it can be started later to avoid crop-damaging low temperatures. It also doesn't need to be grown in blocks, as it doesn't require pollination. Children will be amazed that such a tall plant can grow from a tiny seed.

SHOW-STOPPING CROPS

Kids love a colourful plot, so why not take advantage of some of these attractively-hued crops?



■ Bright orange carrots are always a winner, but you can also get hold of the roots in other shades – 'Atomic Red',

'Cosmic Purple' and 'Solar Yellow' can all liven up both plot and plate.

■ Grown like conventional sweetcorn, strawberry popcorn produces small rounded cobs that are deep red in colour. But kids will be even more interested in the resulting dried kernels, which can be microwaved or 'popped' in a saucepan to make sweet popcorn.

■ Children either love or hate the taste of cauliflower, but whichever side they fall on they'll love growing unusual varieties 'Graffiti' (purple), 'Trevi' (lime green) and 'Sunset' (orange). Don't worry about caterpillar damage – most kids delight in hunting and collecting them!

■ Whether grown outdoors or in, tomatoes are great for brightening up a veg patch. Choose varieties such as 'Purple Calabash' (purple), 'Sungold' (orange-yellow) or stripy types like 'Tigerella' for a visual feast.

■ Few children can resist strawberries. They're easy to maintain, and will also put up with a fair amount of accidental trampling – although you can avoid this altogether by growing in hanging baskets. Smaller woodland types (*Fragaria vesca* cultivars) are the perfect size for small mouths.

■ My daughter can't get enough raspberries. The yellow fruits of 'All Gold' seem to be very popular with youngsters, probably because of their crumbly texture as well as their colour. Make sure your children know the difference between ripe and unripe berries to avoid wastage.

Useful contacts

■ Stephen Shirley is a father of two young girls and Managing Director of **Victoriana Nursery Gardens**. He and his wife Serena assist in a range of school gardening projects. Stephen has also co-designed the 'A World Outside The Classroom' exhibit for this year's BB Gardeners' World Live show. Victoriana stocks the full range of Joseph Bentley children's gardening tools and features an entire 'Gardening With Children' section on its website. Discounts on seeds and plants (20%), as well as books, sundries and tools (10%) are available to school gardening clubs. To find out more call 01233 740 529 or visit victoriananursery.co.uk

■ **Gardening With Children** 0800 032 0370, gardeningwithchildren.co.uk – this website acts as an interactive classroom and allotment plot, engaging kids' interest with fun quizzes, games and easy-to-digest advice

■ **Recycle Works** 0800 032 0377, recycleworks.co.uk – stocks a range of Gardener's Apprentice tools ideal for children. Prices start from £5 for a hand trowel