

Gardening with Small Children

What better place to stimulate babies' and toddlers' senses and cultivates their growing minds than in the garden? When my daughter, Emilia, was a baby, she'd grab the tendrils of vining snap peas, kick with excitement when I'd rub fragrant herbs under her nose, and smile into the faces of kid-sized dwarf sunflowers. I'd name the colors in a patch of bright zinnias, crush sweet alpine strawberries into her mouth, and let her crawl into teepees of pole beans. I didn't think she understood what I taught her, but wanted her to view the garden as a welcoming place to learn about the world.

Although this sounds idyllic, as a new mom, it was often frustrating to have little time to tend the garden! That year, my garden was really weedy and I missed the planting times of crops I'd hoped to grow. Having seen pictures of women around the world that perform backbreaking labor with children in tow, I thought it wouldn't be hard to carry a baby while I worked. But in reality, it's awkward to dig with a short fork and a child in a backpack—and impossible to concentrate on anything else when chasing a wayward toddler or keeping her from stuffing rocks into her mouth! Fortunately, from talking with other gardening parents, I learned some tips to help balance getting chores done, keeping your children happy and helping them learn to garden.

Start small: Your young child will appreciate a garden no bigger than a couple of pots on a terrace or under a grow light in an apartment window. (The only families with young kids that I know who have large gardens have more than one gardening adult, or an only child who takes two-hour naps!) A small garden is more manageable for you too and therefore more enjoyable, which is, of course, the point!



Renee's Godson Mathew

Grow plants that kids love: To keep toddlers excited and interested, grow plants with playful appeal and multiple uses and flavor or fragrance. For example, it's fun to grow Renee's Garden mixed [rainbow packets](#) with two or three different colors of beans or radishes. Kids who are about three years old will want to help you plant seeds; however, be aware that seeds can pose a choking hazard for children under three or so and be sure to supervise closely which is part of the fun. Choose crops with large seeds that are easy for small hands to press into the soil. Since beginning gardeners won't want to wait long until harvest, select plants that grow quickly. If I have limited time to nurture and transplant seedlings, I grow plants that can be sown directly into the ground. For safety's sake, grow non-poisonous plants. Since many edible plants have poisonous parts, it's best to make sure your children don't eat anything you haven't offered them. Here are my top ten

favorites:

Pole Beans: I like to plant these on tall stakes or strings, to see how high our beanstalks will grow. To make teepees, tie a circle of 7-foot stakes together at the top, and plant about four seeds around each stake. Pole Bean "Tricolor" has green, purple and yellow string beans.

Pumpkins: Toddlers as young as two will treasure just one pumpkin and check its progress daily as it grows and ripens. Plus, of course, you can make Jack-o-lanterns, bake pie, and roast seeds. My daughter also enjoyed just piling mini-pumpkins in and out of baskets, and we grew some as gifts for her little friends.



Alice and daughter Emilia

Here's our collection of five easy to grow, colorful, big-seeded flower and vegetable varieties that kids can plant, harvest and enjoy on their very own:

[A Children's Garden Collection](#)

To view and purchase the full line of Renee's Garden Seeds, [click here](#)





Beth's Granddaughter Kyla

Cherry Tomatoes: At Renee's Garden, I once picked cherry tomatoes with a 3-year old who quickly learned by observing and tasting that the brightest colored ones were ripe. "Orange Sungold" in the "Garden Candy" mix are the absolute sweetest and should be tried by all, including those whose children say they don't like tomatoes. Unlike most plants on this list, these are best sown indoors about six weeks before planting outside. Tomato leaves are toxic, so make sure your child can't reach them.

Snap Peas: These peas are so sweet and crunchy that as soon as your child is old enough to eat them, you may not get any unless you plant extras. They also have curly tendrils that cling to your support netting or fence.

Scarlet Runner Bean: These flowers attract hummingbirds and have tasty pods or dried beans.



Radishes: Not every child likes radishes, but the plants mature so quickly and come in such appealing colors that your child will be eager to try them. Keep them well watered to prevent them from tasting too hot. "Easter Egg" comes in red, purple and white, and "French breakfast" is a mix of elongated and round red radishes with white tails.

Sunflowers: Sunflowers are among the most versatile plants to grow for children. It is thrilling to look up at tall brightly colored sunflowers, and we grow our own birdseed by drying the seedheads. Dwarf varieties like Musicbox are friendly to children since they are about the same height and sunflowers attract songbirds and beneficial insects such as ladybugs and hoverflies.

Nasturtiums: Nasturtiums come in low mounding and vining varieties and make a great cover for empty or neglected areas. Renee's has lots of different colors to choose from. The cheerful, bright flowers with lily-pad like leaves are edible and spicy/sweet and can be added to salads. With a magnifying glass, a child can often observe the aphids attracted to the leaves of this flower--kids usually love bugs of all kinds!

Zinnias: Zinnias come in eye-catching colors and can be relied upon to attract butterflies to your garden, especially the variety Cherry-Orange Profusion. They are fast to mature and don't mind summer heat. My favorites are big, round "Blue Point", cactus-flowered "Raggedy Anne", and old-fashioned garnet-red and gold "Persian Carpet" which grows about 18 inches tall. It's fun to grow several different ones for long lasting bouquets.

Alpine Strawberries: Although they have tiny seeds and will take several weeks to germinate, these mounding hardy perennials grow quickly once they've sprouted and will produce tasty little fruits in the first season- and a season long good crop in subsequent years. When I worked at Renee's Garden, they grew in baskets on her patio. Every child who came to visit loved scouring the plants for fruit--their pretty shape, color and delicious taste made them really special kid- friendly treats.

Chamomile: Peter Rabbit's mother put him to bed with a cup of chamomile tea after his harrowing adventure in Mr. MacGregor's garden. It's worth a try to see whether your child will respond to a cup of this calming tea made from flowers you have picked together. Perhaps he or she might like to relax with a special comforting pillow stuffed with dried chamomile and [lavender](#) flowers. Chamomile seeds are small but can be scattered directly on the soil and raked in lightly.

Let your children help: Children enjoy imitating you and like to feel that their "work" is important. Find a space or pots in your garden for them to plant, dig, and rake or play in as soon as they seem ready. Give them extra seedlings or plants, some child-safe tools, and the impression that their area is an important part of your garden. Young children also love to water with a gentle spray wand or watering can; some enjoy weeding or even slug collecting if they are old enough! Don't expect them to work for long without your direct



interaction, expect some damage, and know that they will get muddy and wet! Their urge to help is more important than whether they do things correctly. Over time, their technique will improve and their pleasure and interest will be its own reward!



Joy's godson Blake

Find activities that your children enjoy to keep them occupied in the garden: My little neighbor, Randy, who was 2 1/2 last summer, happily pushed around his toy lawnmower while his parents gardened close by. Some children enjoy playing with trucks or cups in the soil, pulling wagons with things they find around the garden, or a basin with about an inch of water and some bath toys. Even with these amusements, your children can't be expected to enjoy them every day or for long periods of time.

Keep your garden safe. Whenever your children are with you in the garden, make sure there are no fertilizers, pesticides or manure within reach. Keep any sharp or motorized tools out of their way, and keep a close watch on what they put into their mouths! I garden organically, but even organic products should be kept away from children. Start early to teach young children never to put any plant part in their mouth unless you have said it's OK. Garden buckets or other open containers should not be left out if filled with six inches or more of water because they can be a drowning hazard. Remember to keep a constant eye on young children as their attention span is short and it's all too easy for them to get in an unsafe situation very quickly.

Do some gardening alone: If you enjoyed gardening as a relaxing and meditative pastime before you had children, try to make sure you have at least a little regular time for this now. Gardening with small children requires a different type of energy and you deserve a break. Join a babysitting coop, enlist the help of friends or family, invite other parents over who might play with the kids in another area of your home, or hire some help if you can. Only if you are relaxed and happy in the garden will it become a positive learning environment for your children.

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