

Family gardening provides more than a bountiful harvest

By Melinda Myers

Gardeners know digging, planting, harvesting and even viewing a garden is good for the mind, body and spirit. It improves strength and flexibility, lowers blood pressure and elevates our mood. And this is true for all members of the family from the very young to the more seasoned.

Plan on sharing these benefits with yours or a friend's children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews this growing season. Children, and even adults, who grow their own vegetables are more likely to eat them. But gardening does even more to help our children. Research shows children exposed to the outdoors and gardening are more focused, have less issues with attention deficit and score better on tests. Girls exposed to gardens and green spaces are more confident and better able to handle peer pressure.



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higher on tests. Photo/Provided

Here are a few ways to make gardening with family more fun and memorable.

Involve the whole family when planning the garden. Talk about the flowers everyone wants to grow and vegetables you all like to eat. Then break out the paper, old catalogs, scissors, crayons, pencils and rulers. Young children can cut out pictures of their favorite vegetables and flowers and glue them on the paper. Older children can draw the garden to scale on graph paper and plot their choices in the garden.

Make your own plant markers. Once you decide on the plants you want to grow spend a rainy afternoon creating plant labels for the garden. Paint the name or a picture of the flower or vegetable on a flat rock, slat from a discarded mini blind, paint sticks or other recycled items.

Consider giving everyone his or her own garden space. Let them pick their own plants and be responsible for its maintenance.

Design individual plots or divide larger beds into smaller sections. Or give each family member his or her own container. This is a great option when planting space and time are limited. And just about anything can be planted. An old 5-gallon bucket or washtub with holes drilled into the bottom, recycled nursery pots or a colorful raised planter make great gardens.

Direct fast moving, small feet down the path and away from plants. Fun edging materials, mulched pathways or slightly raised beds help delineate pathways from gardens. This helps to keep children from trampling the plants.

Grow some **quick-maturing plants** like radishes and lettuce that are ready to harvest in 30 to 45 days along with slower growers like watermelon and tomatoes. You will keep everyone interested if there is something growing, blooming and good to

eat throughout the season.

Reduce the risk of mistakes. Kids, like so many gardeners, suffer from “more is better” syndrome. Avoid damage from overfertilization by using a low nitrogen organic fertilizer. It’s safe and won’t burn your plants even if the weather becomes hot and dry.

And enlist my favorite “pluck, drop and stomp” **pest management** strategy. Teach children the difference between the good and bad insects and then have them burn off some excess energy as they implement the process.

End the season with a **harvest party**. Use your homegrown produce to prepare a picnic or fancy dinner for family and friends. And be sure to use some of those beautiful flowers you grew to decorate the table.

Gardening expert Melinda Myers is the author of more than 20 gardening books, including “Small Space Gardening” and the “Midwest Gardener’s Handbook.” Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for Birds & Blooms magazine and spokesperson for Milorganite.