



## DIGGING DEEP -Gardening with Kids

By Cynthia Brian

*The Ultimate Mom Gardener (©2008 Starstyle® LLC)*

**“Nothing is more completely the child of art than a garden.” Sir Walter Scott**

**H**ave you ever wanted a sure-fire, stress-free way to enjoy quality time with your children while encouraging them to eat their vegetables? Try gardening!

When I was a little girl growing up on our farm in Napa Valley, my parents wisely gave each of their five children a plot of land of our very own. We were allowed to grow anything we wanted in that space. We could leave it full of weeds, grow flowers, vegetables, cactus or palm trees. What mattered was that we were being given the responsibility to care for a portion of the ranch. We dug in with a passion, following the examples of our parents. Decades later, we are reaping the benefits.

Children are so overscheduled in today's high pressure world that a recent guest on my radio show, Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* says that kids are suffering from “nature deficit disorder”. I agree that we are so plugged in we have forgotten how invigorating it is to hunt for bugs and discover the natural world. By letting kids play in the dirt and grow plants that are safe and fun, we encourage the next generation of stewards of our earth.

Gardening develops excellent eating habits when kids get to eat what they grow. Kids are often surprised to learn that strawberries don't grow in plastic baskets, and that cucumbers are not wrapped in plastic wrap. My son, Justin, experimented with growing a “pizza” garden. He planted all the vegetables that a child could put on a pizza--onions, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, corn, even spinach. His sister, Heather, planted a wagon filled with herbs like oregano, basil, chives, sweet marjoram, parsley, and thyme as ingredients for the sauce. I was a hero for providing the crust, cheese, and meats. The kids loved this “home grown meal”. Gardening and eating are a family affair. Try it with your own children and don't be surprised when they ask for seconds!

What lessons do children learn in the garden?

Gardening teaches patience. There is no fast food in the garden, everything takes time to grow and develop. We plant seeds in May that we harvest in August. Mother Nature will not be

rushed.

Gardening initiates tolerance. We must endure the “barbs” of life to enjoy the beauty of the day. The delicious blackberries we add to our cereal and the perfumed roses that grace our nightstands have sharp thorns that can hurt us if we are not cautious when handling them. Yet, who amongst us would choose a life without these treats?

Gardening inspires faith. One of my students shared her story of tending a “pretend” garden in pre-school. Every day she watered a crack in the concrete believing she would grow flowers. After weeks of waiting, one day, sprouting from a break in the cement a dandelion emerged in full bloom. Her concrete garden became her symbol of possibility instead of unrealizable dreams.

Gardening instills hope. There is no failure in the garden...only fertilizer. Create a compost pile to improve the soil and the planet.. A child's life is like a garden. Bumps and bruises predict strength and resiliency in the seasons to come.

Gardening with your children develops strong bonds with one another and with our world. Caring and maintaining living plants teaches stewardship and management skills while developing solid work ethics. Children learn that plants, like people, need food, water, love, and protection from predators on a daily basis to survive. Whether you choose a plot or a pot, select seeds together to discover the age-old truth that “we reap what we sow.” When you plant radishes you don't harvest carrots! Speaking of radishes and carrots, these plants along with zinnias, marigolds, and beans are some of the easiest seeds for children to plant. A couple of rows will have your children begging to care for the vegetable and flower garden because they grow so rapidly.

Life can be learned in the garden. Children will experience the cycle of living from the new birth of spring to the death tolls of winter. And best of all, you can experience it with them and together reap the bounty from the luscious fruits of the vine. The garden is ripe with miracles and memories!



### PLANTING A “PIZZA GARDEN” OR “PIZZA POT”:

Great for ages 5-18!

“He who wants to eat a good supper should eat a weed of every kind.” *Italian proverb*

April is Children and Nature Awareness month so get the family into the fun by planning for a pizza party that you grow yourselves!

Choose a sunny 3' x 3' plot of land, or if you don't have a garden, try planting in a large clay pot. Plant a bush tomato, sweet green pepper, onions, oregano, chives, basil, and parsley. Water as needed which may mean daily in midsummer. To test soil for dryness, poke a pencil into the soil. If it feels dry to a depth of two inches, it is time to water. Fertilize every two to three weeks or add time-release plant food. Food is especially important when plants such as tomatoes and peppers begin to flower. Experiment and enjoy! Remember there are no failures in the garden.



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## Cynthia's Digging Deep Garden Guide for April

The warm sunshine and mild weather delight gardeners this month. We contemplate our summer needs by designing the type of garden for summer display and fresh vegetables. Easter lilies that are given as gifts now will be planted outside towards the end of this month. Don't be discouraged by the unexpected showers...remember they bring May flowers!

- **INTRUDERS** such as snails and slugs are on the attack with this milder weather. Use beer, copper barriers or pick them off by hand on night raids. Hose off the aphids and put paper-cups around transplants to discourage cutworms.
- **LAWNS** that are tired and old need to be re-seeded. This is also a great time to plant ground covers. Be cautious which type you plant--some can take over an entire garden in a short time.
- **FERTILIZE** fall-planted bushes, citrus, roses, lawns and ground covers. Feed your rhododendrons now and again after blooming in May. Annual beds require monthly fertilizing.
- **CUTTINGS** can be taken from geraniums, carnations, fuchsias and many succulents. Seeds of your favorite flowers can be planted safely now, too.
- **VEGETABLES** of eggplant, tomatoes, parsley, beets, corn, chard, string beans can be sown in the rich beds you made last month. Your children can add a creative scarecrow to keep the birds at bay!
- **SUMMER** annuals are well stocked in the nurseries. The soil is ready and the weather is perfect for planting.
- **COMPOSTING** is still important. Keep adding to your pile, turning, and watering for rapid processing. Kitchen scraps are good for composting.
- **PLANT** frost tender plants such as bougainvillea, hibiscus and citrus as the weather warms.