



## A GARDEN OF CHILDLIKE

# *delights*

**Children and gardens go together naturally, though adults can get in the way.**

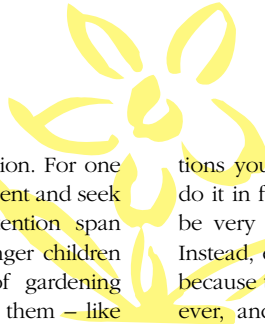
BY RICHARD RIX

Gardening with children can be a very rewarding affair for everyone. Children, especially young children, tend to approach the world in a state of natural wonder and joy, which the act of garden-

ing can encourage. For older people it presents an opportunity for closer bonding and the sheer delight of helping little hands grow and create things.

Nevertheless, gardening with children

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is not always an idyllic situation. For one thing, they can be very impatient and seek immediate results. Their attention span can be short and some younger children may find certain aspects of gardening quite yucky and flinch from them – like getting their hands dirty or encountering worms.

An important aspect to gardening with children is timing. As spring bursts forth and we emerge from winter's cocoon to help re-energize the landscape, there is a big temptation to drag the kids along with us – their baptism of fire, so to speak. Wrong! We are likely to be so busy and preoccupied that we just can't give the little ones enough time and attention, and they soon grow disenchanted.

If you can, wait till the fierce pace of spring gardening has subsided, at least until June, before introducing children to the art. (As far as they are concerned, it will be an art form, on a par with drawing and painting.) Besides, the weather will be more pleasant for them then. Just remember to make sure their skin is protected from the sun's rays and that they always wear a hat.

A garden is a wonderland for a child, not just in terms of plants but wildlife too. Butterflies, bees, birds – all these creatures and more will engage a child's attention and require some explanation on your part in terms of their purpose in the garden.

Explain about pollination and be careful not to instill fear in a child by saying something like, "Careful of that bee or he will sting you." Instead, explain that bees can sting but only when they are scared, and if we leave them alone, they will leave us alone. Then emphasize how essential they are in helping things grow and in the production of honey.

Similarly, if you encounter a slug or caterpillar, which under normal condi-

tions you might destroy as a pest, don't do it in front of a young child. They can be very sensitive to that kind of thing. Instead, explain that you don't like them because they damage the plants or whatever, and how you hope they will go away. If you like, remove the pest to another part of the yard where it will do less damage, or come back and deal with it later, alone. And make sure children appreciate that not all creepy-crawlies are pests.



**Richard Rix**

Because you need some quick and easy results to keep a child interested throughout the growing season, choose some undemanding seeds for them to plant, with varying degrees of help. Seeds that

work well include radish, cosmos and sunflower.

Aroma is important to children, for which phlox and carnations come to mind. Just be careful about prickly things like roses. Planting out nursery-grown annuals (such as marigolds and alyssum) works well too. Don't be too critical of the child's efforts; you can always come back and rework them later.

When planting with very young children, prepare the soil ahead of time if need be, so they are not waiting around while you do it, unless you are sure you have the patience to let them help you, explaining carefully what is being done all the way along. In fact, this is the most important thing to remember about gardening with a child – you have to make the very real sacrifice of not becoming absorbed in your hobby, giving instead full attention to the child virtually all the

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time. Otherwise they will soon disengage.

It helps to define a project before you start, at the end of which they will enjoy a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment and feel free to move on to other things. There are no rules here, just good common sense and a readiness to stay alert to the child, not the plants! Listen carefully to questions and phrase your answers appropriately.

Because plants are living things, feel free to refer to them in a personalized kind of way, such as, “Do you think he would like a drink?” or, in the case of a sunflower seed perhaps, “Do you think she will grow to be taller than you?” The imagination of a child far surpasses our own in such matters and most of us have to make an effort to soar to their level.

### Keep it fun

Please, don't inject any competition into the joy of gardening, for the garden is the one place to leave such a thing behind. You are not trying to encourage your child to grow bigger or better blooms than the next person, just to delight in what they do. It's little wonder that poets and philosophers regard the garden as a sanctuary.

Above all, make the garden fun for a child. Some chores can easily be converted to a game. For example, when enlisting a young child's aid to water a patch of ground, don't just thrust a hose in their hands and tell them to get on with it. Have them first fill a safe container such as a ten-gallon barrel, and then let them dip a watering can into it and carry the water to the plants. It keeps them busy



### DID YOU HEAR...?

- On average, homebuyers spent twice as much on furniture in 2002 as homeowners who did not move.
- The average age when people require reading glasses is 44.

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and they love playing with water – just make sure they are safe and supervised. As well, get some tools and a watering can for little hands to hold and carry, but do let them use big persons' tools occasionally.

I remember how one of my daughters at around age nine (give or take three years or so) would love to be transported at speed to the compost pile atop a wheelbarrow full of leaves, then return with me for the next load. The exercise also served the useful purpose of holding the leaves down on windy fall days. And remember, there are very few trees that can't be improved by the addition of a swing.

Try to nurture the child's love for the garden through the wintertime too – not

persistently, but perhaps at the occasional bedtime reading by delving into such books as *Peter Rabbit* or the *Flower Fairies* series of verses.

Eventually, your child will grow bored with the garden – you may depend on it. But don't worry. You will have planted something very valuable in a young mind. One day your child may take up the pastime again with vigour and delight, relishing for all their days the memories of some happy times spent in the garden with you. 🌻

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### DID YOU HEAR...?

- Canadians are among the biggest coffee drinkers in the world, consuming an average of four-and-a-half cups daily.
- Health Canada recommends consuming no more than 400 milligrams of caffeine per day. A small cup of coffee contains about 100 milligrams.
- The life expectancy for men is now 77; for women, it's 82.