

GARDENS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS



**Wisconsin
Partnership Program**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH



“Me too.” This familiar toddler phrase can serve as a helpful reminder that everyone has a place in a garden. Careful attention to the garden design and materials used will help ensure an inspiring and safe space for even the youngest learners.



WSGI’s Top Three Youth Garden Plants

1. Pumpkins. Little ones love to watch the pumpkin patch grow. Making jack-o-lanterns, roasting seeds, and baking a pie continues the fun.

2. Nasturtiums. These edible flowers are a colorful and delicious addition to a youth garden. Keep seeds away from children.

3. Sunflowers! Give each child his or her own sunflower seed to plant.

Chart its growth by taking pictures of the child standing or sitting next to her plant throughout the summer.



Sensory gardens

Gardens can be educational and exciting places for all learners of all ages. Infants and toddlers can enjoy the sights, smells, sounds, touches, and even tastes of a well-designed sensory garden.

Sights: While looking around your garden, consider it from the perspective of a little one. Are there lots of colors to be seen? Might he catch a glimpse of a bird at a bird feeder or a butterfly near the herb garden? Cluster plants of different sizes so there will be lots to see while at ground-level and also while moving about the space.

Smells: Herbs are a wonderful way to engage a child’s sense of smell. Help a child rub her fingers with a fragrant herb and place her fingers near her nose. Additionally, flowers and turned soil have their own garden smell to enjoy.

Touch: So much learning and discovery occurs when kids are able to interact with their environment. A garden full of textures will inspire exploration. Reserve an area of the garden for a digging area. Incorporate rocks and other natural elements with diverse textures. Plants with multiple textures, like a sunflower, are interesting to touch all season long.



Taste: Extra care should be taken to ensure that all parts of the plants used in the garden are non-toxic in the event they find their way into a young gardener’s mouth. Fortunately this task is much less arduous than some fear. Check the box at left for suggestions of flowers, fruits, and vegetables that will make safe, and tasty, additions to a youth garden.

Sounds: The breeze moving through the plants or birds chirping may be a natural part of the garden. Expand on the variety of sounds a child can hear while visiting the garden by adding wind chime or trickling water.

Interacting with the garden

Even more than seeing the garden around them, young learners benefit from being *a part* of the garden they are in. Incorporating developmentally appropriate elements that enable toddlers and infants to interact with the garden will bring learning to the next level.



- Use different path materials to help small bodies practice balancing.
- Incorporate stumps or benches which little ones can use to pull themselves up to a standing position.
- A bean tee-pee or sunflower house makes for a quiet place to gather. A tunnel covered with vines of squash suggests adventure.
- Designate stations within the garden. A sandbox or digging area might be filled with sand toys and trowels. A water table might include small watering cans.

A note about youth garden safety...

While youth gardens are an engaging place for little ones to learn, they also pose potential hazards if not properly implemented and maintained. Please note that infants and toddlers should be supervised at all times while enjoying their time in the garden. Take care to introduce materials, tools, and plants that are safe and developmentally appropriate for children. Refrain from using herbicides or pesticides in the garden, and build structures with non-leaching materials to maintain safe soil. Keep garden pathways in working order and clear of debris. Finally, some plants or plant parts may pose hazards to young children. For ideas of non-toxic plants, check WSGI's list of top three youth garden plants.

Model interest in the garden and its bounty

Young learners look to parents and caregivers for clues about how to interact with an environment. Meander through fallen leaves. Upturn a watering can. Dig for worms. Your involvement in the garden will demonstrate that it is a safe place to learn. Even better, your excitement about the wonders of the garden will help instill an appreciation for nature that could last a lifetime.

The same principle is true for enjoying the garden harvest. Research shows that children look to adults to provide cues about what and how to eat. A garden-fresh green bean eaten with a smile and a crunch is likely to lead to the same. Showcase garden produce served at mealtime with reminders about the children's role in caring for it. Pumpkins are wonderful to include in a youth garden – little ones love to see them grow week by week, and they make a fun and delicious theme for a fall harvest party.



Resources

A list of great garden-themed books for children: <http://www.brighthorizons.com/~media/bh/corporate/pdf/growingreaders/gardening-books-for-children.ashx>

Sensory garden ideas appropriate for infants and toddlers: <http://growing-minds.org/early-introductions-to-sensory-gardens-infants-and-toddlers/>

WSGI's early care and education briefs: <http://www.communitygroundworks.org/content/school-garden-briefs>

A special thanks to the Helen Godfrey University Child Learning and Care Center in Stevens Point for sharing photos from their garden.



For more information about the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative,
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