

Fun

MAKING PLANTS FUN

FUN TIPS:

- Put a small box around the fruit of a tomato when it's little, the tomato will grow into a square – much more fun to eat.
- If you tape a fridge magnet letter to a young apple, then the fruit will grow around the letter. When you remove it you have your own personalised fruit!
- Grow a 'head' of long, wild green grass by cutting off the foot of an old thin sock or thickish tights, and filling the toe with compost and grass seed so you end up with a good-sized head. Knot the end like a balloon and make a nose by pulling out a lump in the middle and fixing an elastic band around it. Cut out felt features, stick on with fabric glue and leave to dry, then sit on a cup of water.

STIMULATE THE SENSES:

- Introduce your children to 'noisy' plants such as the rattling seedheads of *Nigella* (love in the mist) and poppies, and rustling grasses and bamboos.
- Let them experience the distinctive scents of *Helichrysum italicum* (curry plant), cherry pie heliotrope, chocolate cosmos and *Melissa officinalis* (lemon balm).
- Fun to touch plants include furry *Stachys byzantina* (lamb's ears), sticky *Petunia* or prickly *Eryngium*.

CURIOUS PLANTS:

- Venus fly trap (*Dionaea muscipula*) is a carnivorous plant for the windowsill that catches flies in a jaw-like trap.
- Mouse plant (*Arisarum proboscideum*) has brown, velvety, hooded flowers with long curved 'tails' in spring. A spreading plant for moist shady spots.
- Monk's cowl (*Arisarum vulgare*) has brownish-green striped flowers with a hooded tip and a long protruding 'nose'. It is also spreading but prefers a sunny spot. The flowers will irritate the tongue and mouth if eaten.
- Plymouth strawberry (*Fragaria vesca* 'Muricata') has bristly berries giving a spiky, hedgehog-like appearance. Yellow strawberry 'Pineapple Crush' has pineapple-flavoured berries.
- *Primula* Jack in the Green Group has a green collar round the primrose-like flower.
- Sensitive plant (*Mimosa pudica*) has leaves and stems that fold up at the slightest touch and pink, fluffy flowers.
- Squirting cucumber (*Ecballium elaterium*) spurts seeds out from the ripe fruits up to 2m away, and is stimulated by touch.
- Voodoo lily (*Sauromatum venosum*) produces really stinky flowers and the tubers can be grown on a saucer.



Tools

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Spade
- Small trowel or fork
- Watering can
- String
- Grow bags
- Containers
- Canes
- Flower & vegetable seeds
- Bulbs
- Flowering plug plants

For more information:
www.rhs.org.uk/advice
www.plantforlife.info

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MAKING GARDENING

FUN FOR CHILDREN



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GETTING THEM STARTED

Gardening isn't just for grown-ups, just for summer or just for those with gardens. There are hundreds of ways children can have fun both in and outdoors, all year round. From miniature gardens to planting bulbs, from weeding and digging alongside adults to having a little spot all of their own – gardening can occupy them for hours and even help you out. A good way to get children interested in gardening is to stimulate their senses with brightly coloured flowers, aromatic foliage, scented blooms, tactile leaves and fast-cropping edible plants. It may be necessary for you to explain things initially, making suggestions and putting forward ideas, but in the end the child should feel it's his or her project. And don't worry if you're a beginner yourself – gardening with children is the perfect excuse to go back to the drawing board together!

HELPING OUT

WEEDING, DIGGING & WATERING

Smaller children love to get really messy, but you can turn it to your advantage by getting them to help you with digging, weeding and watering. Very small children may be scared of the creatures that live in the garden, so it's worth spending some time explaining what they do. Soon they'll be merrily collecting them in jars. You can explain:

- A weed is really an 'ugly' plant in the wrong place. Because they compete for food in the soil, it's best to pull them up. Take care to show children which are weeds, or precious plants could come a cropper!
- Some weeds, like dandelions, have deeper roots than others and are a bit difficult to dig up. Start with those that are easily lifted.
- Digging and forking the soil lets in the air which is important for the plants' roots and for all the animals living in the soil.
- To prepare the soil for a flowerbed, you have to turn over down to a depth of about 30cm and break up all the large lumps, adding organic matter such as well-rotted manure or compost.



A LITTLE PATCH OF THEIR OWN

Once a child is happy digging and weeding, they're all set to prepare a small garden of their own.

SPRING SEEDS:

- Seeds that can be planted straight into the ground and produce fast-growing, brightly-coloured flowers are best, as a few weeks can seem years to a child. Look for candytuft, nasturtiums, stocks and sweet peas and packets that say 'easy' or 'good for children'. Big tree seeds, like acorns, conkers and sycamore wings are ideal for young children.
- Use a stick to dig a trench 2cm deep and place large seeds in at least 1cm apart. Small seeds should be sprinkled evenly pinch by pinch.
- Cover with soil and pat gently. Then water thoroughly with a sprinkler watering can, taking care not to disturb the seeds.
- Label the area so you remember what you have planted and where!

SUMMER FLOWERS:

- Choose those that offer instant colour and appeal.
- For a sunny site plant geraniums (pelargoniums), begonias, marigolds and sow sunflower seeds – why not hold a family race to see who can grow the tallest?
- Busy lizzies and fuchsias flourish in shade if they are well watered.
- Boost the soil with some compost and a handful of plant food.



- Plant the tallest plants at the back. Use a trowel to dig a hole that is slightly deeper than the pot, ease the plant and place it in the hole, placing earth back around it. Water thoroughly.

SUMMER VEGETABLES:

- Children love seeing a crop grow in early summer. Look for young plants at your garden centre or nursery.
- Runner beans can shoot several inches in a few days. Make sure they have something to scramble up, such as a wigwam of canes up to 2.4m.
- Equally, marrows expand at a great rate once established but they need lots of food and water.
- Radishes, cherry tomatoes and lettuce grow easily and quickly from seed. Swiss chard comes in a range of stem colours – like 'Bright Lights'.



CONTAINERS ALL YEAR ROUND

If you have a patio or roof terrace, have fun with containers – they will get children used to planning, preparing and tending, and can be moved indoors when it's too cold outside!

WINTER BULBS:

- Put a few pebbles in the bottom of a pretty pot 20–25cm in diameter and half fill with bulb fibre. Plant three hyacinth bulbs, putting bulb fibre around them but leaving the top of the bulbs just showing. Water well. Cover with newspaper to block out the light and keep in a cool frost-free shed or unheated room. Water every 2–3 weeks. After six weeks put it on a window sill and watch the flowers grow!

SUMMER GROW BAGS:

- In summer, tomatoes can be planted in grow bags – you'll need three pre-grown plants per bag. Make drainage holes in the base of the bag and cut out three squares in the top in which to plant the tomatoes. To make a funnel to help with watering, cut the bottom off a plastic bottle and push it beside the plant (neck down). Water often and feed once a week. Push a bamboo cane into each square and loosely tie the plant. As your plants grow, pick off side shoots and some flowers to create lots of big tomatoes. Marrows, courgettes and runner beans can be planted in grow bags.

AUTUMN BOXES:

- Mustard and cress are a favourite with small children. Just put the seeds on wet tissue or cotton wool on a dish and they'll sprout in days!
- Mushroom growing boxes are available at your garden centre or nursery. All you have to do is water them and keep them in the dark.