



Samuel Bailon, 5, works the soil with his hands before planting Black-eyed Susans in at the Global Gardens program at Eugene Field Elementary School.

Your kids will dig this

Get them hooked on gardening with simple, fast-growing plants

BY KIM BROWN
World Staff Writer

It's a dirty job, and children are the perfect ones to do it.

Gardening with the kids this summer not only creates instant hands-on entertainment, but it also teaches them about science and nature and allows them to express themselves.

"It encourages them to try and find answers through their experiences, and it increases their confidence in experimenting," said Heather Oakley, director of the Global Gardens program, a nonprofit group that created school gardens at Eugene Field and Rosa Parks elementary schools. Some students are maintaining their gardens during summer programs.

But seeing is believing. Just ask the kids.

"This is corn," says Jordan Riney, a 10-year-old student in the summer program, as she gives an impromptu tour of the school gardens. "Have you ever eaten colored corn before?"

Jordan also "likes that you get to do whatever you want" in her garden.

"Let me show you my pride and joy," she says as she guides us to a tiny tree planted between the garden plots. "I love it."

Giving kids freedom to create their own garden

helps them become more engaged, Oakley said.

"Let the kids really do the majority of the work that they can do, and let them decide what it's going to be like and what it looks like," Oakley said. "Let them take ownership of the project instead of it just being a weekend project."

Gardening also helps teach kids about patience and trial and error.

"We've found that it increases kids' curiosities and also their motivation," Oakley said.

And kids' gardens should have some quirks, so don't be too picky about their space.

"A lot of parents think it has to be perfect, but it doesn't," Oakley said. "A garden is a work in progress. Let it be the kids' project. It can have some weeds."

Meelina Ruiz, 11, has been gardening with the program for more than two years. Her plot in the school garden includes marigolds, sunflowers, zinnias, tomatoes and cucumbers.

"I love it when you get to pick the fruit and eat it straight up raw," Meelina said.

She's even inspired her whole family to garden together.

"My mom gardens, too, and my baby brother, Shane, is only 2 and he has a shovel. Even though he falls a lot, he just gets back up and smiles and continues," she said.

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Mileena Ruiz (left) and Emely Bailon, both 11, prepare organic fertilizer for their plants at the Global Gardens program at Eugene Field Elementary School. Photos by SHERRY BROWN / Tulsa World



Children will learn to love gardening when they can see their hard work pay off in sprouts and blooms.

Go ahead and get dirty

Here are some tips and fun project ideas to get your kids gardening this summer from Global Gardens Director Heather Oakley and Diana Askins, a member of Tulsa's Community Gardens Association:

1. Choose a space where kids have easy access. "It can't be in an area they can't be in or play in," Oakley said.

2. Herb gardens are easy to grow in the ground or in containers. Try herbs you can use in meals, such as mint, parsley and thyme.

3. Plant sunflowers or corn in a square "big enough to walk

around in," Askins said. As they grow tall, they make "walls" and kids will have a sunflower house they can sit in.

4. Soak some lima beans for several hours or overnight. Then have the kids take them apart, Askins said. "You can see every part of the seed within the bean itself."

5. If a child has a question, encourage them to find the answers either in a book or on the Internet. "Then you can get them curious about learning, and it increases their confidence in experimenting and learning from their own experience," Oakley said.

Grab a shovel and these great plants

Here are some kid-friendly plants to start with:



Sunflowers

Sunflowers. Sow the seeds about 2 inches deep and space them about 18 inches apart. Water the seedlings regularly. It will take about 60 days for them to bloom.



Cucumbers

Morning glories. These beauties bloom in the morning, as their name suggests. Plant them where they'll get a lot of sun, and remember they are "twiners," so they'll reach for something to grab onto. Plant some near sunflowers, and they'll wrap around their stalks creating a beautiful effect.

Tomatoes. Kids love to eat the fruits of their labor, and tomatoes are a big hit. While spring is the best time to plant them, you can ask your local nursery or garden center about faster-blooming plants that bloom in 50 to 60 days. If all else fails, take your kids to the farmers markets to enjoy locally grown tomatoes and plan for next year.



Radishes

Cucumbers. These work well in the ground or in containers and they grow pretty quickly — as little as 50 days from seeds. If you plant in containers, make sure they are about 18 inches deep.

Radishes. These roots grow very quickly, and in as little as four or five weeks, you could harvest the spicy vegetables. While hot weather isn't the best time of year to plant them, you can try by planting seeds in a deep container and watering frequently. Harvest them before they are 1 inch in diameter.



Mint

Lamb's ear. Kids love these soft perennials because of their soft, fuzzy texture. They are pretty hardy, too, and need full sun and well-drained soil.

Mint. This herb smells fabulous and tastes delicious. Plus, it's incredibly easy to grow. It's actually rather aggressive and can take over your entire garden. It's perfect for ground cover, but great in containers, too.

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