

Family farming can be entertaining

By Sharon Williams
Copley News Service

In a fantasy world filled with laser tag, video warfare and dolls that rival Helen of Troy in physical perfection, children sometimes need to get their feet firmly planted back on the ground.

What better way to bring them back to their roots than by putting them to work in a garden?

Many parents who are green thumbs themselves have cultivated that same interest in their children.

Willing to work, eager to learn, fascinated by Mother Nature's magical touch and motivated by results, children oftentimes make the best gardeners when — like plants — the conditions are right.

Following are a few tips to get your children growing:

- **Start small:** Mark off a backyard plot that will produce a modest harvest, but won't overwhelm, especially when it's time to weed.

- **Let the children help choose the crop:** Forget the squash if it's a loser at the dinner table; young gardeners are apt to be more dedicated to a garden filled with fruits and vegetables they like to eat.

If that list is limited, fill in with easy-to-grow annuals and fun crops such as sunflowers and pumpkins.

For the tiniest gardeners, consider fast-germinating seeds and fast-growing plants, since patience is rarely a virtue at their young age.

- **Develop the plot:** Gather everyone around a large square of butcher paper, and let them map out the different crop locations with crayons or empty seed packages and tape.

- **Scale down the tools:** Invest in real tools, but those that children can easily handle, such as a trowel for digging and a blunt-edged, short-handled hoe for loosening the dirt.

Consider a tool's weight as well as height before buying. Some implement companies offer scaled-down tools designed just for kids.

- **Keep it simple:** From sowing to harvest, children need to be nurtured in the garden.

Gear duties to fit the child by relegating simple tasks such as watering and dirt clod-smashing to the youngest gardeners, and more demanding jobs such as mulching and soil preparation to older, stronger green thumbs.

- **Show off the harvest:** Encourage young gardeners to enter that killer tomato or colossal beet in the county fair; 4-H groups have frequent competitions, and reward young green thumbs with ribbons for their efforts.



- **Get help from resources:** Books, such as the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's handbook, "Gardening With Children," and "Let's Grow! 72 Gardening Adventures With Children" (Garden Way) are sprouting with good ideas for ways to make gardening child's play.

- **Seek gardening alternatives:** If you don't have the space for so much as a carrot seedling, check out a community garden project in your area. Many kindergartens, day-care centers and schools include gardening as part of their course study.

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