



How does your garden

GROW?

Jillian Pittman and her brother Alex practice potting violets at The Greenery in Big Cove.

by Kimberly Ballard



Small children love dirt. Give them a spoon, a bucket of water, and a small plot of soil and they will make mud pies until the pigs come home. Uncovering a bed of earthworms is their equivalent of discovering King Tut's Tomb. Tearing older children away from their computers, television and video games to get them outdoors, however, can be a challenge.

A recent national survey cited by author Richard Louv – his book *Last Child in the Woods* was the inspiration behind the No Child Left Inside Coalition – revealed that children under the age of 13 spend only 30 minutes per week outside in freestyle play. Furthermore, a Kaiser Family Foundation study showed 8-year-olds could identify 25 percent more Pokémon characters than wildlife species.

These statistics don't surprise Shelly Goglick, director of education at Huntsville Botanical Garden. Getting children outside to play is the starting point for getting them interested in gardening.

"Show them around the yard and garden area, and identify flowers, trees and shrubs by name," she suggests. "Don't direct them, but lead them along with questions like, 'What is that?' or 'What if we try this?'"

Gardening is a healthy, educational and fun way to spend quality time with your children outdoors. What's not to love? All you need to know are a few basics.

For everything there is a season

The second week of March is the best time for children in our area to plant seeds. At the outset, place seeds in soil in small pots in your house.

"If you aren't sure what to plant, try a seed-starting kit," Goglick

suggests. "After April 15, help your children move them outside and plant them in a larger pot or in the ground."

"It's important to remember gardening is trial and error," says Kay Tidwell of The Greenery in Big Cove. "Not everything will grow to maturity and you should prepare your children for that.

"Teach them the garden requires watering, fertilizing and weeding; but even if they do everything right, some plants will not produce. On the other hand, if they neglect the plants by not watering them, don't run to the rescue. They learn from their mistakes."

What's a zucchini?

There are several ways to go about picking plants for your family to grow.

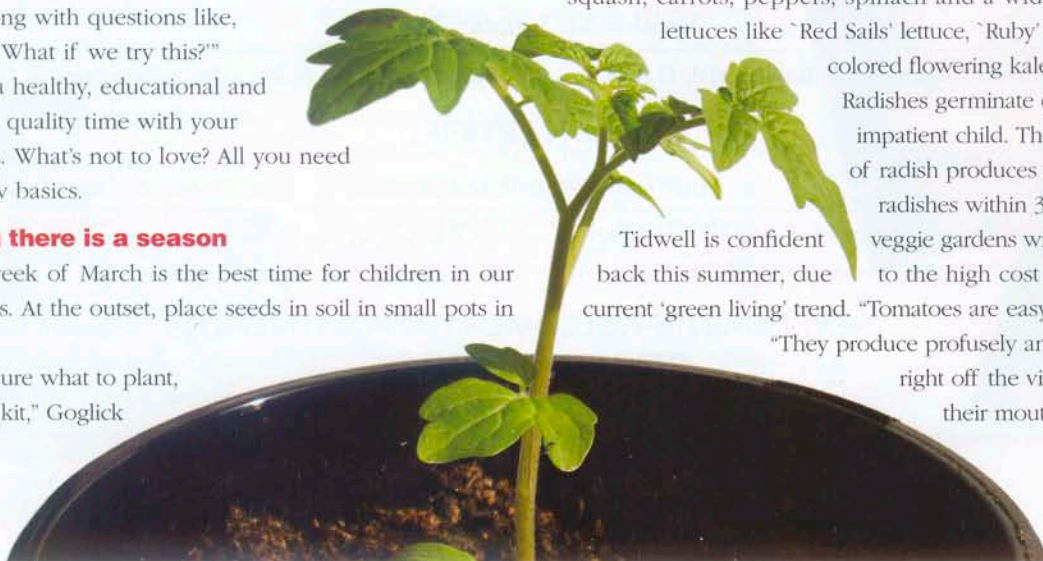
"Children are more likely to eat food they have grown," says Tidwell. "Next time you go grocery-shopping, stop by a farmer's market and point out fruit and vegetables they can grow."

See what catches their eye and pick a few easy veggies to start with. The easiest and most popular veggies to grow are tomatoes, squash, carrots, peppers, spinach and a wide variety of colorful lettuces like 'Red Sails' lettuce, 'Ruby' Swiss Chard or multi-colored flowering kale.

Radishes germinate quickly and pacify an impatient child. The "Easter Egg" variety of radish produces purple, red and white radishes within 30 days.

Tidwell is confident veggie gardens will make a huge comeback this summer, due to the high cost of groceries and the current 'green living' trend. "Tomatoes are easy to grow," she says.

"They produce profusely and kids can pick them right off the vine and pop them into their mouths. They can also sell



them for \$5 a basket and make some extra money this summer."

If you have limited space or live in an apartment or condo, you can find creative ways to grow vine-producing veggies like tomatoes, pole beans and squash.

"Help your child build a teepee using sticks," Goglick suggests. "Pole beans will run and cover it with vines. Use containers and form a trellis for pumpkins, squash, cantaloupes and watermelons."

Culinary herb gardens with parsley, basil, chives, oregano and tarragon are popular and easy to grow in pots during the summer. Rosemary can withstand the coldest of winters including snow.

"Herbs are a little harder with children because few of them are edible on their own," Goglick says. "But there are easy ways to teach children how to cook with them."

Older children interested in cooking may do particularly well with herb gardens. Goglick suggests crushing homegrown tomatoes and spreading them on crusty bread. Add herbs like basil and oregano, and some cheese, and your kids will have a homemade pizza using veggies and herbs grown in their own gardens.

Birds and bees

Annuals and perennials can be just as educational as vegetables and herbs. "Many parents bring their children in to buy flowers that attract other critters like hummingbirds, caterpillars and butterflies, and even bees," says Tidwell. "Sweet flowering perennials like petunias and Mexican sage draw hummingbirds that come for the nectar. Squash plants have huge blooms that attract bees, and kids love to watch them pollinate."

A short lesson on the true nature of bees makes this a safe activity.

"Monarch butterflies and black swallowtail caterpillars love fennel, parsley and milkweed," Goglick says. "And sassafras trees attract a special kind of caterpillar that looks like a snake. They burrow up in the leaves and sew themselves in with silk."

Children learn to recognize them by the folded leaves sheathed in a silky sheen.

Nasturtiums, which are edible flowers, come in pink, yellow, orange or red and are delicious in salads. Nasturtiums are the exception, though, and not the rule.

"Teach children about berries, too," Goglick says, "They are colorful and look appetizing on the bush, tree, or vine but while holly berries, for instance, are a delicacy to red robins, they will make a child very sick."

Healthful benefits

For your own peace of mind, homegrown veggies and herbs help you and your family

avoid potential contact with pesticides. You're also helping the environment by cutting back on the produce you buy that has to be shipped from far-away places.

Gardening also has a therapeutic aspect recognized by a number of national studies.

In 2004, surveys conducted at the University of Illinois showed that disruptive behavior in children diagnosed with ADHD abated after spending time in outdoor activities like gardening and nature walks. In 2005, according to a California Department of Education study, 27 percent of sixth-graders who spent time in outdoor activities scored higher on their exams.

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