



## Get Your Family Garden On

Make your plans and plant seeds now and, come summer, you'll have your pick of flowers and food. You'll also cultivate some essential life skills: When kids tend to plants, they learn to care for the little things—and one another.

by **LAUREN DUNEC HOANG** / photographs by **ERIN KUNKEL**



**BECKONING** the kids outdoors (and away from their screens) can be as simple as asking them to pick a flower or gather some fruit. “We grow berries for our smoothies and cut chives to sauté into an omelet,” says father of three Donald Pell, a landscape designer who owns Donald Pell Gardens, in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. “It gets the kids excited, and I can see that they feel happy out in ‘their’ garden.”

Because I’m a garden designer who often reports on gardening trends, families ask me how they should start their own green patch. I tell them to start prepping now, in the springtime, for a lush garden by midsummer.

Getting things rolling is as easy as scoping out a sunny spot: Most plants thrive with at least six hours of direct sunlight daily. Don’t worry if the sun falls on a patio—you can grow plenty in containers. If you’re lucky enough to have multiple sunny locations, I vote for one that’s close to a hose hookup.



### PREP THE GROUND

Once you’ve settled on a planting area, make that little patch of soil as pristine, weed-free, and nutrient-packed as possible. That’s a perfect spring-day activity, and the kids can help by clearing

sticks, rocks, and weeds out of the way. You'll need to dig up any plants you're ready to replace too. Turn over the soil and break up any dirt clods using a shovel, and let your kid help out with a child-size one. Rake the soil level, then spread a 4-inch layer of organic compost (available from garden stores) over the planting area. Dig this nutrient-rich layer into the soil and rake smooth.

If you're planting in raised beds, follow all the same steps above. And if you're using pots, invest in ones that are at least 12 inches deep (20 inches deep is even better), and make sure each one has a drainage hole. (Sometimes you have to create one using a drill or by tapping a nail on the bottom of the pot with a hammer.) Kids can fill pots with potting soil as well as a few shovelfuls of organic compost per pot.

**START TO GROW**

Check for the last date of frost in your area by entering your zip code or city in *The Old Farmer's Almanac* website ([almanac.com/gardening/frostdates](http://almanac.com/gardening/frostdates)). After that date, it's safe to put seeds and seedlings (baby plants) outside. Before that date, you and the kids can start seeds in small pots inside on a sunny window, but only if that sounds like a fun project, as you'll need to transfer them outdoors later. The fast track is buying young plants from your local nursery when it's warm enough to plant. They're grown in greenhouses by pros, so although they cost more than seeds, they'll be larger and hardier.



**PICK YOUR PLANTS**

These recommendations keep kids (and their love of payoff) in mind. The plants have high success rates in most climates, especially if you adopt a few tips from the experts.

**BERRIES**

Kids won't need much convincing when it comes to picking delicious backyard berries. Landscape designer Donald Pell says he doesn't sweat sharing with wildlife. "I'm not surrounding every plant with bird netting. I just want my family to have positive experiences, and if the birds come and eat some of our berries, we're happy to see them," he says.

**BLACKBERRIES**

- Try thornless 'Apache', which has giant berries with great flavor. Grow on a fence in the back of the garden so it has room to sprawl.
- Short on space? 'Black Cascade' will grow in pots or in hanging baskets.

- Plant in spring and harvest July through September.

**BLUEBERRIES**

- "Plant two varieties, as they'll produce better than one," says landscape designer Robin Parsons, owner of Spring Greenworks, in Kirkland, Washington.
- Parsons likes 'Jelly Bean' and 'Sunshine Blue', both kid-height and possible to grow in pots. Ask an expert at your local nursery if they'll thrive in your area.
- Plant in spring and harvest June through August.

**RASPBERRIES**

- Thorn-free 'Raspberry Shortcake' produces sweet berries, needs no trellising, and can be grown in a pot.
- Plant in spring and harvest in midsummer.

**STRAWBERRIES**

- Ask at a nursery for the best ones for your region.
- Tuck the plants along the edges of beds or in a pot.
- Plant in spring. Berries will ripen in early summer, and some go through fall.

**VEGGIES & HERBS**

"Let kids choose the kinds of veggies they want to grow and eat," says landscape designer Lonna Lopez of Pine House Edible Gardens, in Oakland, California. "The more they can be involved, the more excited they'll be to harvest and eat the food when it's ready."

**BASIL**

- Tuck basil plants around the base of your tomatoes. "The essential oils in the herb help deter pests, and some people even think putting basil near tomatoes makes the tomatoes taste better," Lopez says.
- Pick the leaves all summer to keep the plant from flowering (literally, "going to seed," which means the end of its life).

**CHERRY TOMATOES**

- Try supersweet 'Sun Gold' for snacking on straight from the garden.
- Growing in pots? Parsons recommends 'Tumbling Tom', a compact variety that spills over the edge of a container.
- Start from seedlings planted in April or May; harvest by midsummer.

**RAINBOW SWISS CHARD**

- Lopez says that her son Jasper, 9, happily munches on these leaves. "He loves how pretty the plants are with their red, pink, or yellow stems," she says. To delight your kids, plant a rainbow variety like 'Bright Lights'.
- Plant seedlings in spring and harvest them once they're medium-size by removing the outer leaves. Allow more leaves to grow, and harvest again. Repeat!



Kids are not always gentle with plants, but that's part of the learning process. Fortunately, a lot of plants thrive when you pick their flowers, leaves, and fruit. It keeps them healthy!

plants, like zucchini and tomatoes, shouldn't have their leaves soaked. Teach little helpers to water the soil around the plants instead of showering them willy-nilly. Preschoolers may do best using a watering can to aim water straight on the ground around plants. If kids are eager for the hose, have them set it on the lawn, which won't mind extra irrigation.

**SQUASHES**

● Tender squashes such as zucchini and hard-skinned ones like pumpkins take almost no care and grow quickly into a satisfying jungle. For zucchini, start in the spring and harvest after 35 to 55 days. Wait until the fall to pick pumpkins.

**PEAS**

● Try 'Sugar Daddy', a sugar-snap type, or 'Mammoth Melting Sugar', a snow-pea variety, or one of each.  
 ● After 60 to 75 days, harvest every few days for the sweetest taste (wait too long and they turn starchy). "Kids can pop them right into their mouth," Lopez says.

**FLOWERS**

Colorful ones not only look beautiful, they also attract pollinators, inviting a lesson in being kind to bees and butterflies. Annual flowers give kids instant gratification and fill in quickly for a bigger wow.

**MARIGOLDS**

● Try 'Tangerine Gem', which has small orange flowers and is a deterrent to whitefly (a tomato pest).

**NASTURTIUMS**

● Choose any variety. All parts of the plant—flowers, leaves, and stems—are edible. "We make huge salads from fresh kale, lettuce, and edible flowers," Lopez says. "My son will eat bowls of it!"

**SUNFLOWERS**

● If you'd like to try starting from seeds, sunflowers are a fast-growing option.  
 ● Plant 'Teddy Bear', which is kid-height and fuzzy.  
 ● 'Mammoth' can reach more than 12 feet tall, a challenge for older kids who can stake them up.

**SWEET PEAS**

● Cover a trellis with these sweet-smelling favorites that you can grow from seed or seedlings.  
 ● Try 'Grower's Choice Pride Mix', in new pastel colors, at [floretoflowers.com](http://floretoflowers.com).  
 ● Pick for a bouquet and let kids share with a neighbor.

**SUMMER IS FOR WATERING, THEN ENJOYING!**

**TAKE GOOD CARE**

**HARVEST**

Water immediately after planting, and keep the soil consistently moist while plants are small. After a few weeks, taper off to watering plants in the ground two or three times a week and in pots every other day.

Watering is a great chore for school-age kids. "It allows them to observe the growth of the plants and gives them a sense of pride for their efforts," landscape designer Robin Parsons says. Some

Recruit your kids to help collect fruits, veggies, and flowers every few days throughout the summer. Frequent picking encourages the plants to keep producing (win-win). "Kids learn how food is grown and how much better it tastes when you grow it yourself," landscape designer Lonna Lopez says.

Step back and enjoy the process—even when you hit the inevitable snags: Seeds may fail, and squirrels may steal a berry (or 20). And kids themselves may not start out as gentle stewards. "They run through the gardens while playing," Pell says. "It's their habitat, too, and if they accidentally trample something, I show them how to care for it." ❌