

## NATURE-WILDLIFE

# Gardening with kids helps build love for nature

**Grace Elton** Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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Some of my earliest childhood memories are helping my dad out in our garden. Growing up in South Florida, our backyard was filled with tropical fruit trees, bananas, orchids, and ferns galore. When I was just 5 years old, I would help him propagate lychee trees by air-layering, a method of propagation where you remove the outer layer of the lychee's thin bark, pack sphagnum moss around the wound, cover it with plastic, and wait until roots grow from the branch into the moss. Then you cut off the branch and have a tiny tree, ready to plant. I didn't know then that this wasn't the way that most kids were spending their weekends, but I was fascinated with learning how plants grow, and I took such pride in tending my own little garden plot.

You don't need to have a backyard full of tropical fruit trees to engage children in gardening. In fact, you don't even need to have a yard at all. One of the easiest ways to start gardening with kids is to plant seeds. A seed starting tray or even empty yogurt cups with a few drain holes punched in the bottom work great. A good rule of thumb is that the younger the child, the bigger the seed. My daughter just turned 2, and for toddlers like her, planting big seeds like beans, sunflowers and okra helps develop fine motor skills. When she's a bit older, we'll tackle tiny seeds like peppers and tomatoes.

I involve my daughter in all of our gardening tasks. Even when we are pruning using sharp tools, her job is to put the clippings into the bucket and help me to pitch it into the compost bin. I have purchased her a set of child-sized gloves and plastic tools such as rakes and trowels. Still, she always wants to use mine, so sometimes she ends up with the dull metal trowel and I'm stuck digging with her plastic version.

When we are gardening, we take time to smell the flowers, talk about the shapes of leaves, and examine the insects that we find. We talk about pollinators by following butterflies around our garden and watching bees collect pollen. I make sure that whatever we do is safe

because she is still prone to putting everything in her mouth. I don't use chemicals on my plants or lawn, and I make sure that any poisonous plants have been removed or relocated to an inaccessible part of our yard.

I also involve my daughter in adding a bit of flair to the garden. Kids love art, so let them paint raised beds, decorate plant markers, or paint rocks that will decorate the garden. These whimsical elements create joy and give them ownership of the space.

One of the hardest parts of teaching my daughter about gardening has been learning to be more relaxed about the process and the results. She will put too many seeds in one planting hole. She sees me pulling weeds and will pull out one of my perennials. She sees me deadheading daylilies and starts pulling the flowers off my phlox. She sees me watering containers and wants to hold the hose. Inevitably, she sprays us both. I've quickly learned that I'm not as in control of my own garden as I used to be, and I need to be ok with that.

I often think about how I air-layered the lychee trees as a child. It was probably not the way my dad would have done it, but he was always patient and encouraging of my work. By involving me in gardening, my parents instilled a love of nature in me, and it turned into a life-long focus on environmental stewardship as well as a fulfilling career in public horticulture. Once, I took for granted that I could pick a fruit salad from my backyard. Now, I can see from the vantage point of a parent how special and valuable it can be to form those core memories in nature. And when children fall in love with nature by learning more about it, they may also become empowered to protect it.

*Gardening Central Mass. is written by the team at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. Located on 171 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden is one of the region's top horticultural resources. All year long, garden visitors experience the wonder of plants, learn about the natural world, and make joyful connections. There is so much growing at the garden. Discover it today at [www.nebg.org](http://www.nebg.org). The column will be published on the third Sunday of the month.*

