

What children learn from the garden

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Does your child participate in a garden at school or at home? Thinking about creating that experience for your child?

School garden projects continue to grow around the world, and evidence is mounting that proves gardens to be excellent outdoor laboratories for children, teaching life science, math, and even history when historical gardens are nurtured.

But here are a few more subtle gifts children receive when working in a garden at home or at school.

Trust

When a hard speck (a seed) is dropped into the soil and covered in expectation, children witness humans practicing an ancient faith that it will turn into a pumpkin or tomatoes for spaghetti at the proper time. At first, they may experience disbelief. But when the sprout appears, the leaves expand, the small green fruits swell, turn color, and then the pumpkins or tomatoes ripen, a new perspective and respect for faith and for those who had that faith has a chance to sprout.

Patience

One can whine and threaten to try to get universal laws changed according to one's own agenda, but nature will not be manipulated like a video game or computer – only co-created with. There is simply a season for certain things to happen. When kids give into impatience, yet regardless, the summer melon is eventually cracked open and its sweet aroma fills the air, a new way of being suggests itself to the child.

Awareness of the bigger picture and desire to know more

There is nothing tangible that makes the tiny flecks dropped into the earth become Easter egg radishes – but it happens anyway. What is that force? Where did it come from? What other mysteries does it hold?

Awareness of process vs. instant gratification

There is no click of a mouse that will turn spring into autumn, or autumn into spring, so there is no other choice but to be in the moment and listen closer to the sound of the crunchy leaves being mixed into the compost pile, to enjoy stirring the sand with tiny carrot seeds before planting them so they'll be further apart and need less thinning once they sprout, or to feel the rich spring earth in one's hands that was once partially crunchy leaves last autumn. The journey of the process opens up in the garden like no other place

a child can spend time in. And as they say, childhood is supposed to be a journey, not a race. Instant gratification, at last, gets a rival for a child's attention once she finally surrenders and comes home to the journey, recognizes it's feeling, and knows how to return to it. And then, true gratification – deep enough to lessen the need for more and more instant gratification -- can blossom. Now, the journey and the gratification are partners rather than rivals.

Whole mind development

When gardening, the wind may blow more on one side of the child, but not as much on the other, and her body's wisdom will take note. A bird may chirp its sound in front of her, in back, to the side, or start from one location, then move to another. This process is helping her whole mind develop, vs. the sound coming from one stagnant location (a screen in front of her). The child will use his limbs in cross-lateral motion, and physics will sink in as he experiences for himself that the bucket of dry, fluffy grass clippings is lighter than the same bucket when filled with water. His limbs have to coordinate with his mind. Nature is helping the young gardener develop his or her whole mind, rather than over stimulating portions of the limited left-brain hemisphere.

Being an important contributor

When children work in the garden alongside their parents, it's their own hands that helped create the fresh-cut bouquet now adorning the kitchen table, or the beans, corn and peppers for tonight's chili and cornbread. It's believed that the greatest yearning any human has – which is born the moment the child enters earth – is to be a valued contributor to the greater good in a way that endorses our individuality. The garden can provide this. As well, kids learn as they work along with their parents when it's okay to have mud fights, and when the work at hand must be focused on. They learn perseverance during problems, adaptation to unplanned situations, and how to know spring will come again in spite of early unexpected frosts in fall. These are qualities they can take with them for a lifetime, whether they grow up to be gardeners, farmers, electricians, journalists, executives or presidents of the country.