

Essential experiences... gardening

Growing plants will open children's eyes to a fulfilling pursuit, finds

Penny Tassoni

With ever more children growing up in housing without a garden, it is vital that settings enable children to enjoy the many benefits of gardening activities.

BENEFITS

UW By being involved in the planting and nurturing of seeds and bulbs, children can watch nature in action at first hand. They can learn about the importance of light, water and temperature to plants.

PSED Gardening can be a great way of helping children to feel empowered as they take on a little responsibility for learning about and tending to plants. Having ownership of a plant, however small, can help children to gain in confidence and self-esteem.

PD Gardening involves a range of fine motor movements, including hand-eye co-ordination, as children water plants or pick fruit. It may also involve the use of hand tools such as trowels and small forks. Children can also be involved in large movements such as carrying buckets of soil and raking up leaves.

C&L Children's language development can be supported through gardening as children can spend time alongside an adult chatting without pressure or expectation. In addition, children can learn specific vocabulary such as 'stem', 'compost' or 'weed' that links to the process of growing plants.

PLANNING A PROGRAMME

Planning a programme of activities may simply mean building on what you already do. However, if you do not garden routinely with children, you may like to think about what experiences the children might enjoy. A programme could involve:

- experiences of growing vegetables as well as fruit and flowers



- activities at different times of the year – for example, planting bulbs such as daffodils and tulips in the autumn ready for spring, as well as planting potato tubers ready for new potatoes in early summer
- jobs that the children can take part in, such as raking leaves, dead-heading and identifying weeds.

With a well-planned programme, it can mean that by the time a child finishes at your setting, they have grown peas, beans and courgettes and may be even tomatoes, as well as flowers, such as sweet peas and sunflowers.

GARDENING TIPS

Get advice Children do need to have some success when gardening. So, do your homework about what to grow before investing time and money in plants. If you are not a gardener, go online and look at websites such as www.rhs.org.uk. Think also about asking advice from parents.

Get things for free Gardening does not have to be expensive to set up. While you can ask parents if they have any spare plants, plant pots or seeds, think also about approaching supermarkets as well as garden centres for some items. Look out also for Freegle (www.ilovefreegle.org) or Freecycle (www.freecycle.org) in your area. These are online communities where members can post household items that they need or that they have to give away. A wanted post asking for plant pots, compost or

Gardening is both educational and exciting for children

Children do need to have some success when gardening. So, do your homework

spare plants is likely to generate quite a few offers.

Think about soil, light and water A useful mantra for successful gardening is 'right plant, right place, right season'. If your provision closes over the summer, you will also need to consider

how plants will be watered when you are not there. If you decide to plant in pots, use very large ones as these are less likely to dry out than small ones.

Buy the right tools It is worth investing in a few gardening tools that are child-sized so that children can learn to handle and use them correctly. Children should also be encouraged to clean them after use and to put them away. Toy tools should be avoided as they are not effective.

Build on experiences There are many ways that you can build on gardening experiences with children. It is worth taking 'before, during and after' photographs so that children can see the changes that have taken place. In addition, you can create 'garden centre' role play, as well as look out for story books such as *The Enormous Turnip*.

Involve families There are many ways to involve parents in their children's gardening activities. Parents can be invited in to see what the children have been doing or even encouraged to start off seeds with their child indoors which can be planted out in your setting afterwards. Parents might be happy to help as well as give advice.

Finally, it is worth encouraging families to grow plants at home. Spider plants, hyacinth bulbs and cress are easy to grow on a window sill and can encourage an interest in growing at home. ■