



Frequently Asked Questions related to Outdoor Learning Environments:

What the experts say about
“Growing Tomatoes”

NC Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance

Child care providers have many questions about what they can, and can't do, on and in their outdoor area. They have concerns that there may be violations or demerits from the licensing consultant, the environmental health specialist or from an environment rating scale assessor if they are having an assessment done for a rated license. In an attempt to dispel some of the concerns that are floating around, listed below are some of the most frequently asked questions about outdoor learning environments. We are all committed to removing barriers to staff taking children outdoors, while still ensuring that the experiences that the children have are healthy, safe and enriching.

As new questions are received they will be added to this list. We hope that you find them helpful as you work to enhance your outdoor area for the children in your care. This resource is in development and is not yet complete, but it does hold valuable information that can be used as it is completed. The questions and issues included in this handout have been given attention from the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project, the Division of Child Development, and Children's Environmental Health Branch with position statements from the NC Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance.

NOTE: The agencies and organizations providing the answers to the questions below are specified by the following initials and color codes:

- **NC OLE Alliance – North Carolina Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance**
- **NCRLAP – North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project - responsible for the environment rating scales assessments.**
- **DCD – The Division of Child Development - responsible for child care licensing.**
- **CEHB - Children's Environmental Health Branch - responsible for the health inspection rules and training of Environmental health specialists.**

NC OLE Alliance Position Statement on “Growing Tomatoes” in preschool gardens:

There is tremendous value in gardening with children. Tomatoes can bring much learning, day by day wonder as fruit grows, flare and yes . . . delicious fruit to eat! There has been some controversy over growing tomatoes in licensed child care centers because the leaves and stems of tomato plants have mild toxicity. Our state leaders have engaged in research and case studies and have determined that the toxicity levels of the leaves and stem are very low. Ingesting them would be problematic only in large quantities, and there is no evidence or cases to indicate that tomatoes should be prohibited from the outdoor learning environment for children 3 years of age or older. Tomato plants are not recommended for infants and toddler areas because children of this developmental stage enjoy exploring their environment with their mouths.

Why should we grow tomatoes? There are many reasons to grow tomatoes. One is that they grow in abundance in North Carolina and provide nutritious and delicious fruit for meals and snacks. From a seed or young plant, children learn firsthand that tomatoes come from our garden, not just the food shelf. Children learn the concepts of smaller and larger as the fruit grows. They learn colors and shapes as the fruit ripens. Different kinds of tomatoes offer the opportunity to compare and contrast their size, color, firmness, and taste. Some varieties ripen in late spring and some extend into the autumn. Children can count how many tomatoes are on the vine, how many are ready to pick today and how much today’s harvest weighs. How many tomatoes will one plant produce? How can we prepare tomatoes? What does it look like inside? Which kind is my favorite? Imagine all the graphing, documentation, art, celebration and learning that can occur.

You don’t have a garden? We all have different skills and abilities when it comes to growing plants. Some of us have “green thumbs” and some have never tried. The tomato just might be your first successful gardening adventure. If you have never gardened, you might try a few container plants of tomatoes. Place them in the sun and give them good soil and water them often. You may find yourself and the children in your class growing more fruits and vegetables after this success!

You are an experienced gardener? You have probably experienced success with tomatoes at home or in the gardens “outside your fence”. Now, you can grow tomatoes and offer preschool children an “up close and personal” experience with the life cycle of a tomato! Enjoy!

<p>NCRLAP - Yes, growing tomatoes in your garden is fine. Gardening is viewed as an intentional planned activity when there are enough tools and supplies for children (such as gardening spades, gloves, watering cans, wheel barrows). Handwashing is required when children return indoors after gardening. Growing tomatoes in infant and toddler play areas is not recommended.</p>	<p>DCD - Yes, growing tomatoes inside your licensed child care outdoor learning environment is fine for children 3 years of age or older. Gardens are acceptable but would need to be maintained. Growing tomato plants in infant and toddler play areas (children 2 years of age or younger) is not allowed.</p>	<p>CEHB - Handwashing is required after outdoor activity including gardening. It is important to harvest the ripened fruit to prevent it from falling to the ground and attracting vermin. The use of pesticides is not recommended for gardens in licensed child care programs.</p>
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