

Children's Vegetable Gardens

An introduction to the location, layout, construction & planting of raised garden beds

Gardening with children provides numerous opportunities for hands-on learning, inquiry, observation, and experimentation. Gardening also helps children build an understanding of and respect for nature and our environment. When children participate in growing edible plants, they are more motivated to taste, eat, and enjoy fruits and vegetables. With some planning, you can design and install a garden that will suit the needs of the children and adults that will be using it. Dream big, start small, and have fun!

Location:

Locate the garden in a sunny spot, not too far from the building. Having the garden close to the center of activity makes it easier to keep an eye out for weeds, insect pests, watering needs, and ripe vegetables during harvest time. Before deciding where to locate your garden, pay attention to the sun patterns in your outdoor space for a few days. Which area gets the most afternoon sun in the summer? Is that spot relatively flat and accessible? It may be the best location for your new garden.

Other things to consider:

- Proximity to a water source – the closer the better.
- Storage for garden tools, such as shovels, watering cans, etc. Locating your garden next to existing storage, or in a spot where you can accommodate new storage, is ideal.

Layout:

Decide on the size and dimensions of your garden beds. It may be helpful to sketch out your plan on gridded paper to get an idea of how the garden fits in with the existing elements in your space.

Design Tips:

- Keep beds narrow so that children can reach the middle of the bed from both sides (no more than 3-4 feet wide)
- Space garden beds far enough apart to allow room for children to walk between them (18 inches apart minimum, 2 feet apart is a good rule of thumb)
- To test the layout of your garden beds, you can lay a garden hose on the ground to mark the outline of the beds or, sprinkle flour on the ground in the shape of the bed you are imagining to see what will work in your space.



Checking measurements for raised beds



Building raised beds with 1" x 6" boards



Different ways of incorporating raised beds into the environment



Children planting seeds together



A colorful raised bed made from recycled lumber

Construction:

There are many different design options depending on the space and time you have. A traditional outdoor garden is planted in the ground. Unless the area has been cultivated before, you will need a tiller to break the compacted soil before you begin planting.

Another common option is to use raised beds. These are framed structures, typically 9 inches to 2 feet tall. Raised garden beds are fairly simple to construct and make it easy to get started gardening, regardless of the soil in your area. Use long-lasting materials such as cedar, redwood, or composite lumber, or choose brick or stone. Fill beds with good quality garden soil and compost (available at most garden centers or home improvement centers). Check out the Green Desk post on timber raised beds for additional information.

Benefits of Raised Beds:

- Better soil quality, since you aren't relying on native soil, which may not be ideal for growing vegetables.
- Keep plants safer – less likely to be trampled by little feet.
- Longer growing season, since the soil in raised beds tends to warm up sooner in the spring. This allows you to plant your summer crops a few weeks sooner than if you were planting them in a traditional in-ground garden bed.
- Reduce weeds and lawn grass invasion.

Planting:

To maximize your garden space, and to provide year-round learning opportunities, consider growing a spring, summer, and fall garden. Refer to the websites below for lists of warm and cool season vegetables, growing recommendations, and planting calendars. For those who live elsewhere, contact local cooperative extension agents or nurseries for planting time guides for your region.

NCSU Cooperative Extension Spring Garden Planting Guide

NCSU Cooperative Extension Fall Gardening Fact Sheet

Resources:

Be Healthy - Grow What You Eat. Albertson, A., Neill, K., Revels, E. North Carolina Cooperative Extension, February 2004.

Grow Vegetables. Buckingham, Alan, and Jo Whittingham. DK Publishing, 2008.

Kids Garden! Hart, Avery, and Mantell, Paul. Williamson Publishing Company, 1996.

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Creating environments for healthy human development and a healthy biosphere for generations to come.

The purpose of the *Natural Learning Initiative* is to promote the importance of the natural environment in the daily experience of all children, through environmental design, action research, education, and dissemination of information.

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