

# COACH'S CORNER

*Coach's Corner is a DIEEC blog dedicated to providing fresh ideas for all early childhood education professionals.*



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Image: Getty Images Signature

## Gardening with Young Children

It's that time of year when the change in weather has us all craving the outdoors and sunshine. Many programs may be making changes to their outdoor space or coming up with new activities for the upcoming months. If this sounds like you, consider looking into gardening!

### Benefits of gardening with young children

There are so many benefits to adding a garden to your early childhood education program. Gardening encourages skill building in a variety of developmental domains.

**Fine and gross motor skills-** Gardening encourages physical activity through digging, planting, watering, and harvesting.



**Math-** Children can be actively involved with counting out seeds, measuring growth, and sorting and counting the harvest.



**Science-** Children can make predictions about plant growth and observe the plants and insects in the garden.



**Social and emotional skills-** Children can work together to care for the garden. Caring for living things builds empathy and respect for the natural world, and the sensory experience can lift moods and ease anxiety. Gardening is also an exercise in patience while waiting for the plants to grow!



**Nutrition-** Research tells us that children are more inclined to try new vegetables and fruits if they participate in growing them.



## Gardening with limited space

You don't need a lot of space to plant a garden! Even the smallest of spaces can accommodate gardening. If your program has limited or no outdoor gardening space, there are lots of creative ways to grow plants.



A raised garden bed filled with tomato plants. (Image credit iStock Credit: AHPPhotoswpg)

If your program has outdoor space but lacks grass or ground to plant in, **raised beds** could be an option. These can be purchased or even built if you have the materials.



**Container gardening** is another option. This can be done using buckets, plastic containers of various sizes, or milk jugs. One program in a past cohort of DIEEC's Let's GROW Outside! program used grow bags placed in a sunny spot on a parking deck!



(left) Seedlings growing in containers. (iStock Credit: Vasil Dimitrov), (right) A gardener sitting in a garden bed cuts through empty milk bottles with scissors, using them as protection for seedlings. (iStock Credit: Adrian Plitzco)



**Vertical gardens** are another way to make the most of small spaces. There are many variations, including ones that resemble step ladders and others made from towering pots. (Be sure that any tall structures are properly anchored to avoid tipping hazards.)



A tall vertical garden sits on an apartment balcony (patio) with fresh salad greens, herbs, and vegetables. An ideal small-space and urban gardening solution. (iStock Credit: Ashley-Belle Burns)

**Hydroponic gardens** are a great option for growing plants indoors. Hydroponic gardens use a soil-free method in which plants receive all their nutrients from a water solution. These gardens can be bought or even made, which could be a fun activity for older children.



Below are images from family child care provider LaDonna Lewis. Along with the children in her program, she plants various types of gardens each year, including the hydroponic garden in the picture.



A countertop hydroponic system uses nutrient-rich water and humidity domes to nurture a variety of labeled herbs like sage and oregano. By eliminating the need for soil or a backyard, it provides an accessible way to grow fresh produce in any indoor setting. (Image Credit: LaDonna Lewis, family child care)

## Tips for success

- **Choose fast-growing plants** for quick results, such as lettuces, radishes, or sunflowers.
- **Engage the senses.** Choose plants with strong scents, interesting textures, and bright colors. Add wind chimes or a bird feeder. Sensory exploration is especially helpful for engaging infants and toddlers.
- **Use child-appropriate gardening tools** for both safety and enjoyment. Providing smaller sized watering cans is a great way to get toddlers involved in caring for the garden.
- **Let children decorate the garden** with artwork and child-made plant labels.
- **Balance fun and responsibility.** Allow time for playful digging and exploration!
- **Include infants and toddlers too!** Watering and digging are appealing for toddlers. Consider providing some digging space where plants won't be disturbed. Supervise infants as they crawl, touch, and explore the sights, sounds and textures.
- **Embrace mistakes.** Picking an unripe fruit before it's ready or plucking the top off a blossom rather than leaving the stem attached are learning experiences.
- **Always keep safety in mind.** Choose child-safe materials, blunt-ended tools, and non-toxic plants. Supervise closely, especially when working with small items like seeds.

As you can see, just about any space can be home to a garden. You can plant a combination of flowers, fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Gardening and sharing food and plants are a great way to build community. Another fun idea is to partner with another early childhood program and trade harvests!

We would love to see how you are gardening in your program!

## Resources

- [Grow a Salad! Preschoolers Plant and Prepare Their Food](#)
- [7 Tips for Vegetable Gardening With Your Toddler](#)
- [Early Introductions to Sensory Gardens: Infants and Toddlers](#)
- [UD Cooperative Extension- Master Gardeners' Helpline and Resources](#)
- [Farmer's Almanac Planting Calendar and Guide](#)
- [Let's GROW Outside!- DIEEC](#)