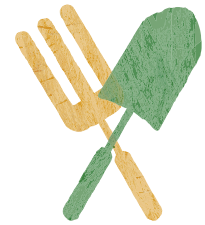


# Fearless Beginning Gardening at Your Program



*The joy of learning to garden with young children*

## Do any of these thoughts sound familiar to you?

- I've never gardened before. I feel **overwhelmed** and am not sure where to begin.
- I'm **not sure** how to involve young children in gardening.
- Without experience, how will I get support from my staff/supervisor for doing this?
- Is it **safe or allowable** to put a garden in at my program or have children eat the produce?

If you relate to these statements, you are not alone. In fact, if you have never gardened before but want to try, you are one of the best candidates for starting a garden at your program.

**The less you know, the more you can authentically model for children what it is like to try something new** by asking questions, seeking out information, and experimenting.

The key to gardening with young children is to start small. Here are two safe and simple ideas to get started:



1. At your program, find a sunny window and plant lettuce seeds in a small pot. Sample small pieces when plants are big enough.
2. In spring, plant a few pea seeds in a 5 gallon bucket (with holes in the bottom) with organic potting soil. Put in a sunny spot outside and water when soil is dry to touch. Observe beautiful pea flowers. Let children pick pea pods when finger sized!

## How can we engage young children in the garden?

- Encourage children's **joy and wonder** about the natural world by modeling exploration with all the senses.
- Allow for **silence and observation of the unexpected**, like a butterfly landing on a flower. As ECE teachers, you are experts in capturing the learning power of the unexpected!
- Ask **open-ended questions**. Know that "I'm not sure, what do you think?" is always a great response. It's the wanting to know that is most important.
- **Allow children to do as much as possible themselves**. The more we let go of perfection, the more learning that can happen.

***"Not only are gardens an approved practice for ECE sites, they are strongly encouraged and a best practice."***

- Abbe Braun, Professional Development Manager, Supporting Families Together Association

***"Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funds may be used to purchase garden supplies, and the fresh fruits and veggies produced are great for use in meals and snacks."***

- Molle Polzin, RD, CD Nutrition Program Consultant, WI Dept. of Public Instruction

Let's address some fears by thinking about how to approach common garden challenges:

Garden Challenge	Approach	Opportunity/Solution
Plants are infested with insects.	Grab magnifying glasses and observe. Guide children in thinking about how the bugs got there.	Put some of the bugs in a jar, ask staff and families to help identify them.
Weeds take over the garden.	Talk about how Mother Nature likes to cover bare soil with plants, even ones we didn't try to grow. Try to identify the weeds.	Use straw or leaf mulch to cover bare soil. Ask a detail-oriented parent to set up a volunteer weeding schedule.
Animals eat the plants.	Learn more about deer, rabbits, or squirrels with books or games. Look for tracks.	Cover the plants with deer netting or fence the garden.
Trampled plants, plants die.	Talk about emotions (sadness, frustration), learning from mistakes, and persistence. Pretend to be plant doctors and nurse the plant back to health.	Replant and try again! Container gardening or clearly delineating paths can help to keep small feet out of garden beds.
Not much to harvest.	Talk with children about what might have caused this and what can be done differently (water more often, plant at a different time, etc.). Then look for worms!	Consult with staff and families who are gardeners or contact UW Extension agents or Master Gardeners for help and advice.



***"We have a garden that our 2-3 year olds care for and also a garden that the infant and toddler children created. Gardens are truly a golden nugget for all children. We have learned so much together, and it is fun!"***

- Jacquelyn Ward, PleasanTime Child Care Center, Inc., Cambridge, Wisconsin

***"I can't believe nature can taste so good! That's why I like to learn about nature."***

- Child, Troy Kids' Garden, Madison, Wisconsin

## Resources to increase your gardening confidence:

- [Got Dirt?](#) - Provides step-by-step plans for starting a garden. Also available in Spanish.
- [Safety in the Little Gardeners' Garden](#) - Building and using a garden that meets the safety and licensing requirements for child care programs in Wisconsin.
- [Cultivating Childhood Wellness through Gardening](#) – online training (Registry credits available)
- Email Farm to ECE Trainer Deb at [deb@communitygroundworks.org](mailto:deb@communitygroundworks.org).



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