



Five things to remember

WHEN SOWING SEEDS WITH KIDS

FIVE WAYS THAT GROWING WITH
CHILDREN CAN GO WRONG, AND
WHAT TO DO TO MAKE IT A SUCCESS!

1. CHILDREN CAN BE COMPETITIVE

Many children like to "finish first"

Many young children are very competitive, even if that competitiveness isn't loud and obvious. Children like to feel that they are good at something, and often good means 'fast' or 'first'.

This often manifests itself in children rushing ahead to the next step to try to get there first. On the plus side, this shows they are eager. On the negative side, they can often be so focussed on their opportunity to do the next step that they don't listen carefully to instructions, or complete tasks out of order. An example would be children being so keen to plant their seed that they push the seed into the compost a long way before being told that it should be planted quite shallow. The possible result of this is that the seed will not be able to get to the surface before being exhausted, and the little grower is disappointed. Or a child planting small seeds onto dry compost before finding out it's better to water first or they get washed away.



You can plan for this by...

- Giving instructions one at a time - for some very young children, it is easier to take in one task at a time, so they can focus on that one and not be trying to complete the next two at the same time.
- Giving an overview of the most important things - older children can often guess the tasks ahead, so staggering the instructions won't work. Going over the whole process before starting and highlighting the most important points for success (such as the seed being planted shallow in the example above), means that children who cannot help themselves but rush ahead will have a better chance of not spoiling their success.
- Don't give the tools before the instructions are complete - if children have pots, soil and seeds in front of them or in their hands, their brains will be so engaged with the objects that they will find it much harder to listen. If a child doesn't have a seed in their hand they can't plant it prematurely. Break the task down into stages and go through the instructions for each stage before providing the tools for that stage. This doesn't mean you can't look at objects until they are needed. For example, you can allow children to examine and discuss seeds, then collect them in until you are ready to plant them.

2. SEEDS ARE FIDDLY FOR CHILDREN

Young children's basic motor skills still need practice



One of the brilliant things about gardening is that it helps children to master their motor skills - both large (digging, raking and hoeing) and fine (planting, weeding, pricking out). But as adult gardeners it is easy to forget that these skills are still developing in children and they may get frustrated if they can't copy you exactly.

This can cause unintentional problems with small seeds - most young children find it very hard to sow seed finely and pace their sowing. With the best intentions seed can often end up in lumps and clumps with big spaces in between.

You can plan for this by...

- Metering the seeds - if a child is sowing a row of carrot seeds for example, give them a few seeds for the first few centimetres and then allow them to come back for more for the next few centimetres and so on. Don't dole out all the seeds for the row in one go, unless you want them to all be sown at one end.
- Teach them to pinch effectively - it is easier to use small amounts by pinching and sprinkling than by shaking from a palm. Place seeds on a saucer or dish and encourage the children to take pinches of seed out at a time. This prolongs the experience, builds their control and rations the seed effectively. If you want to, you can practice this skill with them beforehand by getting them to sprinkle glitter onto a line of PVA glue on paper and try to make it last along the line of glue.
- A fun alternative to traditional planting is to make your own seed tapes beforehand, or germinate the seeds and mix them with fungicide-free wallpaper paste in a squirty bottle then squeeze it along the row. Or you can also try mixing the seed with fine sand so that you can make a thicker row and still spread out the seed. It's good for children to practice sowing the seed finely themselves but these ideas are great if you are sowing more than one type of seed, to try different things.

3. CHILDREN FIND ESTIMATING HARD

They need to practice estimating, but measuring is satisfying too

Gardeners get used to estimating planting distances, depths and spacings by eye. But young children are still learning both how to estimate and measure quantities and sizes.

A bean seed planted a little deep will generally still make it to the surface, but a carrot seed might not. Seeds have to contain all the energy they need to reach the surface and sunlight.

Small seeds can only sprout so far and then they will exhaust themselves, without reaching the light which would give them their next burst of energy. This can lead to disappointment if children estimate the depth wildly wrong.

On spacings, if plants are too close together, they will have to be thinned and children will be upset at 'their' plants being discarded.



You can plan for this by...

- Using different units of measurement - if the children are too young to know what 5cm means, they may be able to poke a hole 'as deep as their middle finger'. Or if they can't estimate spacing between plants of 10cm, they can plant 'a crayon length apart'.
- Combine estimating skills with measuring skills - part of children's scientific development is to make a theory and then test it. At a basic level, this can be begun by guessing how big something is and testing if your guess is close or correct. Give children a depth of hole to estimate and poke out, and then check the depth by dipping in a measuring stick (a pencil or lolly stick), and marking the measuring stick with a felt pen. They can then take the measuring stick out and check against a ruler (or if you have used a crayon length, against the crayon).

4. NATURE ISN'T ALWAYS FAIR

Most young children have a very me-centred view of fairness

Nature is often unfair to individuals and fair to a whole system. In a garden, some plants will die for the benefit of other plants or organisms. Or they die because of disease, pests or neglect, but something else thrives.

On a smaller scale, very few packs of seeds will have a 100% germination rate. And of those that do, some will be weaker plants which will not thrive even when treated like the other plants. Or through accident or lack of care, a bunch of plants will be killed off (you might lose ten plants from a windowsill of thirty plants, from scorching on one very hot afternoon, for example). Nature doesn't mind these losses, because overall enough plants survive, and of the best quality, to make the next generation.

Many young children, however, are less able to see the big picture, they feel their own losses very acutely, and are little comforted by the success of the group as a whole. If 'my' bean seed was one of the three which didn't germinate, or fell over in the wind and snapped, that is all that I can see. My investment in the beans as a whole is reduced or even finished and any successes are not mine.

You can plan for this by...

- Avoiding identifiers on seeds. If children are only planting one of a seed, it is sometimes better to keep pots the same and not label the plants with the child's name. Then no one will know whose plants have failed.
- Sowing several of a seed - if you want children to know which seeds are theirs and care for them, let them plant several so that they can overcome the germination failure rate.
- Get them to work in teams - if several children sow seeds and then pool the successful plants and work together to care for them, this allows for a percentage of failure while maintaining the individual investment.



5. CHILDREN ARE IMPATIENT

The younger the child, the longer and more elastic time can feel



Time is incredibly long when you are four. Waiting for Mom to come off the phone feels like at least three days, your birthday always seems like several years away and a leek plant might as well have been planted last century by the time you eat it.

On their first try, the concept of plants taking a long time to grow is a huge idea by itself. Starting with a slow maturing plant can be very off putting.

You can plan for this by...

- Starting children with fast maturing crops and build up - start with radishes, salads and peas. When they have got the idea of the cycle of the plant, you can gradually build up the length of time to harvest. Of course if you have space and time to grow a variety of crops, you can choose plants to mature every couple of weeks so there is something fast, medium and slow to harvest.
- Have an interim project - if you are sowing something which takes a while to mature, do a smaller project in between to maintain interest. Things like mustard cress and sprouting seeds in jars can be very quick and satisfying. Planting lettuces between rows of roots can give a quick and efficient crop, or radishes next to beans, for example.
- Let them see what's happening under the soil. Instead of planting beans straight into the ground, start them off in a jar with cotton wool so the children can see when they germinate and how the sprout gets to the top. You have to be very careful transplanting them so as not to break the sprout.
- Even better sow some beans into soil and then a few in jars at the same time so the children can see the activity 'underground' in the jar ones and then anticipate as the soil seeds poke through and understand that the same is happening to them.



Thank You...

I hope you have found this useful.

If you want more ideas on gardening with children, our website has ideas for gardening with children for every month of the year.

You might also like our membership club, The Little Foodies Club, which sends growing, cooking and eating ideas along with a veggie patch story every month to your child.

Anything else you need? Tell us at enquiries@thefoodies.org. We'd love to hear from you



The Foodies Books

www.thefoodies.org

