

Teacher to Teacher

The Children's Farm

By Nancy Jones
Director of The Children's Farm

Nancy Jones is director of The Children's Farm, a school for young children in West Lakeland. She teaches classes on gardening with children and can offer tips to your school about getting started. She would also love to hear about your successful gardening experiences with young children. Email her at chfarm@aol.com

Its grown, its grown!

The excited cry came from the classroom where Jared, the first to get his snowsuit off after a time of sledding outdoors, had ventured in to check the recently planted bulb garden on the table by the north window. He now came eagerly toward the entryway, waving a newly sprouted bulb. In his delight, he had plucked it out of the tray; green tips showing and little roots dangling! Everyone gathered around to see the new growth. The teacher skillfully avoided any embarrassment as she helped Jared and others tuck the bulb lovingly back into the potting soil. No harm was done, (bulbs are so hardy) and after all the excitement was what it was all about.

That excitement of helping, watching and learning about growing things is a large part of the curriculum at The Children's Farm School, and one which we consider uniquely appropriate to early learners. I'd like to share with you why we believe gardening is a valuable part of a school learning setting, both indoors and out. I hope to give you some encouragement to "get them growing" in your own early childhood setting.

Why garden? First of all, we think it's important and basic to our commitment to preparing

children for the future. It has been said that the exceptional challenge for mankind in the 21st century will be the challenge of dealing with the environmental issues, of keeping our species alive in a sustainable balance with nature. Ruth Wilson, who writes about

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environmental education for young children, has suggested that the present environmental crisis is due, in large part, to a growing "Psychological Detachment" from nature and even a "prejudice against nature," (Wilson, 1996). Without positive exposure to the natural world, children may never develop a "mature, responsible way of relating to the world they live in," says Wilson. We believe that learning to take care of sprouting bulbs or seedlings in a classroom can be a step toward this understanding.

Secondly, children (and people) need nature; the joy, wonder and beauty that they can learn to appreciate at an early age. Rachel Carson in *Sense of Wonder* (1965) tells of how children experience nature: "it is not half so important to know as to feel," to prepare the soil for future curiosity and knowledge. She sees nature appreciation as a gift we can give to all children, as a solace

against the trials of the world that will stay with them for a lifetime if we give them this early gift of wonder. As I watched the children this week (early March) playing with the potting soil in the water table, I thought of the joy they felt in smelling the earth, even as the ice outside had only begun to melt. I knew that seeds they would soon be starting would be a newfound miracle and source of wonder once they came up.

In addition, the basic science concepts involved in learning what growing is all about can be introduced in an age appropriate way with gardening activities. In earlier societies, the years of early childhood were times to discover worms, poke sticks in the mud, make dandelion chains, pick up acorns, to experiment and manipulate with nature. Today's modern children are "alienated from the sources of their strength," as Carson eloquently says. Yet schools can provide these experiences if we plan for them. Gardening exposes children to the life cycle, daily miracles and long-term processes, which they may not experience in the plastic world of modern life. For example, at school we can help children take seeds off of sunflower heads, plant them in pots, replant them outside, play under their towering heights, and harvest the heads in the fall to feed the birds or to provide more seeds for planting next year. Furthermore, gardening provides all the ingredients for a successful curriculum for young children:

1. It is hands on, tactile, learning by doing. Just watch those kids digging for worms in the springtime or rolling pumpkins out of the garden in the fall!

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2. Gardening is motivating and interesting because it provides real life learning, and challenges for children cognitively in age-appropriate ways. Instead of spring art projects of cutout paper tulips, how about a bulb garden in the corner of the playground or on the window sill inside? Children can plant, watch, water, measure and chart in truly meaningful ways, because they are real plants and the kids know it! And in the fall, a snack of beans from the bean pole garden growing up a fence provides motivating ways to enjoy and involve children in picking, snapping and eating the freshly cooked beans, delicious because they did it!
3. Gardening meets the educational needs of the whole child. Most early childhood curricula try to offer activities, which foster development cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically.

Here are few examples of how we see gardening help us teach the whole child:

Samantha, age 4, has chosen to water the amaryllis bulb today. She takes the sign "Amaryllis is watered" off the watering squeeze bottle, goes to the sink to fill it, and comes back to thoughtfully and strongly squeeze the water out. Touching the soil, she pauses as if to decide it feels OK, and sticks the sign on the side of the pot...*amaryllis is watered*. Then she looks at the measuring stick behind the plant, and notices that the plant has grown since the last mark was made. She walks to the art table to select a green marker, and carefully makes a line at the height of the new growth. Turning to a teacher, she holds out the marker and says, "Now you write the numbers."

Jenny, age 3, is hesitant to join a group at the sandbox. The teacher asks for help watering the lettuce row next to the playground. Jenny fills a watering can, and starts toward the garden, but the can is heavy. "Could you ask someone in the sandbox to help?" Suggests the teacher. Soon Jenny has found a new friend, as together they carry the can toward the garden, smiles of confidence and shared purpose on their faces.

Jeremy, age 3, really misses his Mom today. The children are painting at outdoor easels and pounding at the workbench, but he is not easily diverted from his nostalgia. Soon a teacher walks by

with a wheelbarrow, full of leaves for the mulch pile. "Say, Jeremy, can you help wheel this?" Buoyed by the teacher's belief in his ability, Jeremy comes to help. Somehow, by helping, he feels less helpless, and his tears subside.

John and Martha are active, physical players, who sometimes cross the teacher's comfort level into violent play or play that could be dangerous to others. When observant teachers see their energy rising, shovels or rakes come out, depending on the season, and suddenly people are digging deep and deeper holes, or raking larger and better leaf piles to jump in. Competent with the tools, John and Martha become positive leaders for others who come to join them in some meaningful play/work and all feel the joy of physical exertion.

Cognitive learning of concepts, prereading and numbers, occasions for social engagement, opportunities to increase sense of competency and emotional growth, or outlets for positive physical engagement; all are real and valuable lessons taught and learned through gardening. In short, it's a great curriculum. You don't need a large area; a corner of an outdoor play yard, or a table in front of a classroom window to hold pots and plants can be enough space to get started. Engage your kids in the wonder of learning, and start a garden at your school! Let's put the words, "It's grown, it's grown!" back into every child's growing vocabulary.

REFERENCES:

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