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Inch by Inch, Row by Row...When is This Stupid Plant Going to Grow?

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For us gardeners, the approach of spring is a most exciting time. It?s not that we don?t enjoy the winter, with its time away from the garden to rest and recharge. After a busy autumn of harvesting the garden?s bounty, winter offers time for quiet contemplation. Perhaps we have, in fact, a bit too much time to reflect on the happy thoughts the garden brings to mind this time of year: The change of seasons. The inexorable passage of time. Decay. Death. But just when you?re ready to toss yourself into the compost pile, springtime arrives and your spirits soar as you look forward to a new season of gardening with your children.

Working in the garden with kids is lots of fun. You?re outside. You?re playing in the dirt. Sharp bladed tools are flying around. It?s pure quality time.

And it?s educational! Gardening teaches kids important lessons about the ?cycle of life.? But parents, be ready to answer tough questions about why your child?s pumpkin plant died.

Besides the metaphysical stuff, the kids learn practical horticultural skills that might stay with them their whole lives. Even after they?ve grown up and moved away, they may still use the gardening knowledge that you gave them to grow their own plants in a garden, window box, or dorm room closet. These valuable skills include fine motor control (handling tiny seeds), sorting (distinguishing good plants from weeds), adjusting water pressure (?JET? isn?t the best setting for lettuce plants), and perhaps most importantly, pest control.

As every gardener knows, if you do not control pests, they can quickly destroy your entire crop. You need to know which pests are present in your particular ecosystem and take appropriate, safe measures to protect your plants. Can you identify the most harmful pests that attack garden vegetables in Maine? Slugs? Thrips? European earwigs? No. The primary pests that threaten your garden are, of course, the children themselves.

I?m kidding! Children are a joy to have in the garden. Still, bringing kids into the garden involves walking a fine line. Literally: between the tomatoes and the spinach. And figuratively: The goal is to introduce the children to the fun of gardening without destroying the garden in the process. I know it?s not easy to cultivate their spirit of exploration while constantly yelling ?Don?t walk there!? But try to inculcate a love for the tranquility of nature with a minimum of screaming. It?s the standard parental high-wire act of teaching your kids to do some fun new activity: One false move and you?ve turned them off of gardening for life.

Many small children are just not yet equipped to care meticulously for fragile vegetable plants. These are people who take the name ?squash? literally. The key is to focus on the aspects of gardening that come naturally to young kids, such as touching really dirty things and then immediately putting their fingers into their mouths. Or playing in the mud. Give a three-year-old a shovel and turn him loose in a large area of dirt, and you?re set for a whole day of fun.

But then comes the tedious part. Carefully plant the seeds, one in each little hole, in nice straight rows. Boring! My son has his own highly efficient cultivation method: Use shovel to dig a single large hole 6 inches deep. Empty contents of seed packet into hole. Cover and keep digging elsewhere. Fun!

Finally, the seeds somehow get planted and the ground is nicely patted all flat and smooth. Then you say to the child, ?OK, you see this big patch of dirt, where we?ve been having a great time all day, digging and jumping and rolling around and making mud pies? Well, you must now stop digging and never dig here again. You can?t even walk in here anymore!? As your toddler?s lip begins to quiver, you hasten to explain: ?Because if we wait very patiently, our seeds will sprout and grow into big plants that, if we take good care of them, will eventually produce ? vegetables!?

Wow, every child?s favorite things: waiting patiently, not touching, and vegetables!

No wonder gardening is such a popular family activity! I?m telling a three-year-old boy, whose attention span is frankly somewhat shorter than the growing season, that he must immediately cease doing something really fun in order to receive the delayed gratification of growing his own brussels sprouts.

Yet amazingly, it works! They do like to watch the plants grow. They are able to stop shoveling where you planted, as long as you give them an alternative outlet for their natural digging instinct. (I set aside a small area in our community garden with nothing planted as the designated digging zone.) They will help take care of the garden. They will eagerly pull up weeds, along with such innocent bystanders as carrots and beets and radishes. (Helpful hint: When gardening with kids, plant a few extra seeds to compensate for the approximately 90% mortality rate of your plants.) They will have fun watering the garden (and even more fun watering Daddy). They will help you harvest the crop (but forget about gathering just enough vegetables for each day?s meal; once a child picks a pepper, it?s awfully hard to stop until he?s picked a peck, whatever that is, or at least until all the plants are completely denuded).

Your kids might even start to like vegetables. The other night in a restaurant, my son Henry asked for broccoli on his pizza. The stunned waiter, after recovering from the shock of hearing a child order broccoli for the first time in his career, explained that it was unfortunately not available as a topping. Henry happily settled for red and green peppers.

Just like the ones he picked ? all at once ? in our garden last fall.

About me: I'm a dad, a gardener, a writer and a lawyer (in that order). You can read more of my humor columns at www.rakishwit.com[1] .

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