Starting a Preschool Garden
A Menu of Options

Planting a garden with your preschoolers can be a fun learning experience for everyone! Gardens help children develop healthy fruit & vegetable eating habits and can increase opportunities for development of physical and social skills. Some of the best teachable moments can happen in a learning garden environment.

**Plant a window sill or indoor container garden:**
**Advantages:** Accessible, affordable, easy to maintain.
**Challenges:** Limited light in some rooms, need regular watering, not all plants grow well inside.
**Tips:** Use recycled materials for planting: milk jugs, yogurt cups, etc. Plant shallow rooted crops: lettuce, radishes, spinach, herbs. Be sure containers have drainage holes, and put something underneath them to catch drainage water. Plants need at least 6 hours of sunlight so put in sunny window or hang a grow

**Plant a container garden:**
**Advantages:** Affordable, easily transportable.
**Challenges:** Needs more regular watering, dries out quickly.
**Tips:** 5 gallon pots and buckets work well. Use potting soil and make sure there are drainage holes! Amend your potted plants with organic fertilizer or compost every 2-3 weeks.

**Plant directly in the ground:**
**Advantages:** Affordable, requires less watering than raised beds and container gardens.
**Challenges:** Potential soil contamination—be sure test your soil for lead before you grow any edibles. In-ground gardens are more likely to grow weeds.
**Tips:** Think about creating obvious pathways so that your students know where to step. You can make your own stepping stones, or paint rocks to create a visual guide! Amend with compost. Make sure you have access to water.

**Plant in raised beds:**
**Advantages:** Defines garden space, keeps kids feet out of garden—therefore. Easier to reach in the beds. Fewer weeds.
**Challenges:** Needs consistent watering.
**Tips:** Try getting materials donated. Use fir or cedar boards, cinder blocks or other material, don’t use pressure treated lumber. A 3 x 8 bed is a good size for preschoolers.

**General Tips:**
**Watering:** Water the soil, not the plant, preferably before mid-morning. Hand water with a watering can or gentle hose nozzle. Encourage preschoolers’ participation with watering - try using a bucket with smaller containers for children. Sing a song that indicates how long to water a plant so that they aren’t overwatered!
**Seeds:** Larger seeds are easier to plant. Spring: beans, peas, potatoes, radish. Summer: squash, melon, cucumbers Fall: garlic, fava beans.
**Soil:** Get a soil lead test: http://growing-gardens.org/portland-gardening-resources/books-and-links/ has more information. Try using a blended soil, and add compost to your garden to add nutrients.
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**Tips, Challenges, Resources**

**Tips for a Registered Family or In-home Care Center:**

- Start small! Plant a few things at a time. Try engaging kids first with window sill planting or a worm bin.
- Engage your families! Create a routine for regular maintenance and have clear roles for parents to get involved regularly. For example, you could have Wednesday Waters or Monday Maintainers...
- Connect your snacks with what you are growing in the garden. Link the planting, growing and harvesting activities with stories, movement and social skill building.

**Tips for an Early Childhood Center:**

- Think about ways to incorporate parent involvement through pre-existing parent structures (e.g. parent councils). See if there are experts among parents, and offer learning opportunities about gardening for parents who haven’t gardened yet.
- Make sure you have clear communication with teachers, administrators, and approval from board and property management before making any building plans. Having support is key when starting a new garden at an early childhood center!

**Common Challenges, and Suggestions:**

- There is **no single way** to start a preschool garden. Try asking your families, teachers, and administrators to see which type of garden will work best for your preschool environment. If you have community involvement, try creating a Garden Committee to develop a Master Plan to identify your vision, goals, maintenance plans and potential stakeholders.
- **Maintenance** can be particularly challenging over the summer, but can also be a great opportunity to engage families to learn about growing food.
- Consistent **funding** is a challenge. Be resourceful, think of community partnerships to leverage for donations, discounts, volunteers, and other support!
- Which **curriculum** is the best? There is a lot of curriculum out there, try to treat your preschool garden program as an experiment and learn with the children! Gardens can be unpredictable; plants might not grow and that’s okay! Your preschoolers will love the learning opportunity!

**Resources:**

  [http://www.farmtopreschool.org/curricula.html](http://www.farmtopreschool.org/curricula.html)*

  [http://www.growing-gardens.org/](http://www.growing-gardens.org/)*