



HANDS-ON
SCIENCE



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Green Pinky Gardening

You don’t have to be a master gardener to introduce your kids to the joys of playing in the dirt.

GARDENING HAS ALWAYS been a part of my life, although I would not say that I have a green thumb. When it comes to the plants in my care, the kill:alive ratio is about even, yet I persist in trying to grow things no matter what kind of space I have. When I lived in Japan for a year, my little apartment wasn’t much bigger than my current closet, but I had a tiny balcony, and I filled it up with plants. My good friend, Sachi, enjoyed container gardening like me, and she was so skilled at English that she was able to make a joke when I explained what the expression “a green thumb” meant.

“I have a green pinky,” she said.

Ever since, I’ve claimed the same thing.

I have been trying to pass on this green pinky to my boys, though getting children to share a love of gardening is one of the easier child-rearing duties. Show children what seeds are and how — if you put them in the soil in a sunny spot, add water, and wait — they grow! It’s beautiful and amazing, and children aren’t stupid. They know right away this is a miracle.

When my eldest son was four-years-old, he was obsessed with seeds. Whenever he got a chance, he’d pull seeds off trees or plants — at a park, grandma’s house or our yard — and he would put them in his pocket, telling me he wanted to plant them as soon as possible. He did this so many times that I wanted to pull my hair out, but I didn’t. I just smiled and said, “Okay.”

Since we didn’t have the space or time to give all those seeds the tender loving care they needed to grow, I let my son do whatever he wanted with them. Sometimes he would put them in a pot next to something else that was growing. Other times he would dig a little hole in the yard. He didn’t always remember planting these seeds, but sometimes he did, and he would water them carefully.

We also had a real garden. We bought seeds or small plants from our local hardware store, and my son experimented by planting seeds from the fruit or vegetables that we bought at our grocery store. It did not matter whether or not these seeds actually grew. It was the act of caring for them and giving them a chance to grow that was important to my son.

If my son suggested planting something that I doubted would grow under the conditions he gave it, I said, “Go ahead. Let’s experiment.” He was happy to see anything grow. He was thrilled when he grew pumpkins. But if something didn’t grow,



it was a lesson learned. And there was always next year.

Today, we still don't have time to be serious gardeners. My yard is a work-in-progress, and it always will be. Garden experts would cringe if they saw how I plant flowers too close together and how I let my boys overwater everything. (We don't water our grass to save water and money. Our neighbors aren't too happy with that.)

This lot is unruly and mostly uncultivated, but it's the perfect place for children to dwell. They can romp through the woods and find wild ginger or honeysuckle. They can dig in the middle of the front yard. They can pull up wild onions and smell the raw earth. They can find a seed and plant it wherever they want to. My only rule is to be gentle with what is already growing. Be mindful of what you pick or where you put your foot.

My sons have been helping in the garden since they were toddlers, and every year, they are eager to plant something. Every summer night we go outside to tend the garden, and they usually want to water, but I don't make them do it. I don't want this to be a chore. Experts say that gardening is good for children, but I don't need studies to tell me what it is doing for my boys. They are learning to love the earth. They are learning patience. They are finding out about what feeds them, both in body and mind.

This spring, no matter what space, time or budget you have, find a little patch of dirt and some seeds, and let your children plant them. Don't worry about learning how to garden, if you don't know how. This isn't a test. Someday you will have time, and if you already have a little area where you have grown something, you'll understand more about what you're learning.

When you take a walk in late summer or fall, find the seeds and let your children stuff them in their pockets. It doesn't mat-

ter if they get planted or not. You are fostering an appreciation of plants and gardening and too many good things to list here.

You can also sprout seeds in a jar — you can use dried pinto beans from the grocery store. Just put a wet paper towel on the bottom of a jar, set the beans on top of it, and close the lid. Put it in a windowsill. Mist the seeds if the paper towel dries out. Don't let it get too wet or it might get moldy. But if that happens, just try again.

If your child gets excited about planting, you could try to go a step further, but only if she's willing to listen. Teach her about the life cycle of a plant. You can find a cheap poster at a teacher's store or print one off the Internet. In my house, we have enjoyed reading *From Seed to Plant* by Allan Fowler and *How a Seed Grows* by Helene J. Jordan, but a trip to your library would be all you need to do. The most beautiful documentary I have ever watched is about plants and their pollinators: *Wings of Life* by DisneyNature. At some point in your child's homeschool education, you must watch that together.

But this is an activity that you don't want to spoil by trying to teach too much or get it perfect. All you need are a few seeds or a few small plants. Order them online or visit your local garden shop. When you get them home, teach your children how to be delicate, but don't worry too much if they don't have the right touch or a green pinky. Let them have fun, and you will accumulate cherished memories of gardening together. And who knows? Maybe someday you will build that dream garden together. ✕

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