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The PRIDE Issue

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Cultivating Wonder

As prominent nature writer and journalist Stephen Moss famously said: "Nature is a tool to get children to experience not just the wider world, but themselves."

If you're wanting to make your garden a more excitable, child-friendly space, why not get the kids fully involved in the changes you're making by asking them for ideas of what they'd like, whether that's a sandpit, veg patch or child-safe water feature?

Let their imagination run riot and you'll be surprised at what they come up with and how you can make a garden that works for the whole family.

Choose tough, resilient plants like lilacs, buddlejas and campanulas that will withstand a barrage of balls criss-crossing the lawn and invite them to build willow dens that double as both play spaces and natural wildlife habitats.

Last year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show showcased child-centred design in the 'No Adults Allowed!' feature garden, which was a collaboration between designer Harry Holding and children from the Sullivan Primary School in Fulham.

The garden – designed by children, for children – brought the pupils' imaginations to life in an immersive sanctuary of lush woodland and meadow planting, with colourful boulders and water pools.

Much of the original garden has since been relocated to the school grounds and

To celebrate National Children's Gardening Week, Velvet's Melanie Taylor shares how to get kids interested in gardening – and discover how time outdoors can equip them to thrive in our tech-focused world



RHS Junior Show Judges

Picture: RHS / Oliver Dixon

adapted to suit its new setting minus the stream and rockpool. The subterranean den has been rebuilt by Root and Shoot as a sustainable climbing frame set within a sea of wildflowers using timber from RHS Wisley and recycled rubber materials. Sullivan Primary School is one of more than 30,800 schools taking part in the RHS Campaign for School Gardening, which provides free training, resources and awards to schools and youth organisations to provide opportunities to engage with

nature in an accessible and meaningful way. For details on how your child's school can get involved, visit rhs.org.uk/education-learning/school-gardening

And for the first time in its history, the RHS invited a group of child show judges from nine London schools to bring their unique perspective to determine the winner of the inaugural Children's Choice Award, with designer Ann-Marie Powell's vibrant wildlife-friendly 'Octavia Hill Garden by Blue Diamond with the National Trust' coming out on top.

Make a metre matter

Whether you have a garden, balcony, flat, windowsill or access to community green space, there are plenty of ways to get children growing. It's amazing what you can achieve with just a tiny space. The Gardeners' World Make a Metre Matter Campaign is harnessing the collective power of people across the UK to support wildlife and protect the planet by transforming just a metre of space. Involve children in simple gardening tasks like watering, digging or making compost. You don't need much to get going, seeds

are relatively inexpensive, and you can recycle everyday items like yogurt pots, cardboard rolls and tin cans as plant pots. Use cotton wool or damp kitchen roll to germinate seeds like cress and microgreens, and you can even make biodegradable pots for the resulting seedlings from strips of newspaper.

Ignite their curiosity

To make the most of their short attention spans and to keep children interested, start off with seeds and plants that will germinate and grow quickly, like nasturtiums, radishes and runner beans so that they can see fast results. Bright colours, strong scents and tactile leaves will all stimulate their senses and pique their interest. Here are three of my favourites:

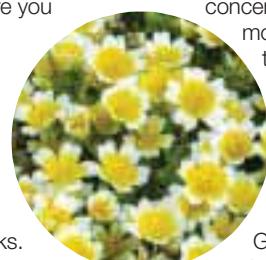
Living stones

Lithops, otherwise known as living stones or pebble plants, are a novel way to introduce children to the wonders of plant adaptations. These colourful succulents, native to South Africa, camouflage themselves to look like pebbles to avoid being eaten by animals in the wild. They store water in their two fleshy leaves, so only need watering occasionally and are easy to care for as long as you give them about five to six hours of sunshine a day on a bright windowsill.



Poached Egg Plant

The seeds of the meadowfoam or poached egg plant *Limnanthes douglasii* can be sown directly into the soil where you want them to grow as late as June, ready to flower in September.



These happy little self-seeding annuals like full sun and well-drained soil and will enliven any border with their bright white, yellow-centred petals which resemble egg yolks. Popular with pollinators, they are a particular favourite of hoverflies so keep pests at bay in a vegetable garden.

Lamb's ears

Commonly known as lamb's ears or woolly hedge nettle, *Stachys byzantina* are part of the mint family. Their reflective, hairy, silver leaves are an adaptation to protect them against herbivores and to trap moisture into their leaves, making them an excellent choice for drought-tolerant gardening.



They are also beloved by the wool carder bee: the females break off the hairs, roll them into woolly balls and place them in holes for their nests.

Swap screentime for green time

With so much screentime being the norm, the garden is the perfect environment for a



RHS No Adults Allowed Garden by Harry Holding at RHS Chelsea 2024

Picture: RHS / Sarah Cuttle

digital detox – it's proven that being outside improves both our physical and mental wellbeing.

Mindfulness allows us to switch off autopilot and focus on the here and now. It helps us to feel more relaxed by reducing the stress hormone cortisol and increasing energy levels. Through my work as a youth coach, I've seen first-hand how teens can use mindfulness techniques to help reduce stress and anxiety, improve their mood and build their self-esteem.

Encourage young people to take time out from their devices and sit quietly outdoors, listening to the sounds around them and paying attention to their breathing as they concentrate on being present in the moment. Let them engage all of their senses to discover how many different things they can see, hear, touch, smell or eat in the garden. Nature walks and yoga outdoors can also be part of their physical exercise routine.

Gardening and time spent in nature can have many positive health outcomes for teenagers. In addition to improving their communication skills, co-operation and empathy, teenagers and indeed everyone, can benefit from the socialisation and sense of belonging that gardening brings through their involvement in school or community projects.

Encourage mindfulness

For younger children, you could adapt 'I-Spy' in the garden to an alphabet word game, asking them to name all the plants and wildlife they can see that begin with a particular letter, or hide fairies and dinosaurs in the undergrowth for them to find.

At primary school, we had a nature table: why not set one up at home for younger kids to display their prized specimens and nature's treasures? A teddy bears' picnic is

also a great way for little ones to sit calmly and observe what teddy sees around them. One of my favourite childhood memories is of me aged about five, making mum some lovely 'perfume' by mixing rose petals, lavender, fairy liquid and toothpaste together into a potent squishy mush. And who can forget the simple pleasure of creating a daisy chain when you finally managed not to entirely split the stems with a clumsy thumbnail.

There are so many wonders to excite in a garden that will nourish and nurture young minds. Let's do all we can to encourage a lifelong journey of discovery that will enhance children's personal growth. In our ever-changing climate, what better legacy can we as gardeners leave to future generations, than to teach them to care for the Earth, themselves and each other today?

Melanie Taylor is a Newmarket-based garden designer. Need help with a garden project? Contact Melanie via melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk



Hide fairies or dinosaurs around the garden for little ones to seek.

Picture: Melanie Taylor