

# Child-Friendly Gardens: Low-Tech Fun for Kids!

by Eva Monheim



**A child playing in the flower fountain at Longwood Gardens' outdoor Bee-aMazed Children's Garden. For information on the gardens and activities for youngsters at Longwood, visit [www.longwoodgardens.org](http://www.longwoodgardens.org). Photo/courtesy Longwood Gardens**

**R**ecently, I asked a roomful of adults how they happened upon their passion for gardening and the outdoors. The answer was, in many cases, "It all started when I was a child." Their response was prompted by happy memories of helping a parent or grandparent in the garden or by the recollection of carefree days playing in a garden as a child.

## *Create a Garden and Create Memories*

Designing and planting child-friendly gardens not only create indelible childhood memories, they also provide opportunities for children to learn and grow in a safe and nurturing environment. More often than not, children develop many life skills, talents and hobbies during their hours of fun and discovery in the garden.

Structuring your gardens around childhood activities is a good way to begin. Consider an area for play; an area for planting flowers, vegetables, and fruits; an area for picnicking; and last, but not least—an area for rest. If all of these areas are provided, you can be certain that your children (and, yes, your pets, too) will spend many hours playing outdoors, no matter what the season.

## *Getting Started*

In creating these gardens, you must, of course, take into account the age of your children and their needs. Parents with younger children will feel more secure if there are physical boundaries that indicate where they can and can't go. These areas can also double as outdoor family rooms.

To create these outdoor rooms, select fast-growing evergreen shrubs for natural borders in combination with interesting fencing. A gate allows easy access to the area. In many cases, the backdoor of your home can double as the entry to the enclosed garden area.

## *A Garden With Many Purposes*

If the garden is being shared with adults, provide separate areas for the children and the grownups, and then include an additional area that accommodates both.

My husband and I had a small garden when our children were growing up, so the screened-in porch acted as the area of safety and also doubled as the resting area and a picnic area. The lawn and the garden beds below the porch became the spaces for more active play. In the back of the garden was another seating area, with the garage wall and the garden on one side and a hillside of trees on another.

On the third side, we planted a protected, U-shaped garden that incorporated a floor of pea gravel for playing with trucks, cars and other toys. The area also provided an ideal spot for adults to relax in the evening. Even our dog liked lounging there—it provided a cool respite on hot summer days. When the kids were teens, the same graveled area became an ideal place for an early fall campfire with their friends.

If your property allows for it, a grove of trees with a few chairs and a hammock provides an intimate area for resting, reading or an afternoon catnap.

### *Teaching Tools in the Backyard*

A small herb garden planted in pots or in garden beds is a terrific teaching tool. Children quickly learn each herb by smell or taste. Incorporating their favorite herbs in prepared foods encourages more healthful eating habits. My children loved picking mint for summer iced tea and chives for their baked potatoes and sour cream. An educational outing to a local garden center to select herbs, flowers, fruits and vegetables to grow also offers a wonderful learning experience.

Having children choose seeds from garden catalogues during the cold months often prompts a winter planting project indoors. Helping in the selection allows them to become involved in all aspects of the whole garden project.

### *Family Picnics, Too*

When summer finally comes, have a family picnic on the lawn. Encourage children to help in the preparation of the picnic by picking fresh vegetables and fruits from their garden patch.

Fresh ripe cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, leaf lettuce and raspberries can be some of the simple and delicious components of the menu. Urge kids to help in preparing their own salads and other healthy bite-size finger foods for their picnics. Not only is this a fun, shared activity, it also instills independence and good eating habits. (Include snacks for the pet members of the family; they will feel special too!)

Our children still talk about the food prepared for our family picnics and special dinners outdoors. Both attribute their cooking skills to their early time in the garden and the kitchen.

### *Meadow, Anyone?*

If you have a larger area, consider planting a meadow—with a mowed path meandering through it. Meadow flowers attract a plenitude of insects, including butterflies. Catching the creatures in nets or jars and then observing them with large magnifying glasses helps children to see insects up close. Position a small table and chairs in the meadow area as part of their observatory. Encourage gentle handling of the insects and their release afterwards. A sketch book and box of colored pencils for drawing will add to the fun.

The perfect kid-friendly garden should always include a good-sized compost pile for them to dig in. These outdoor laboratories are chock-full of earthworms. Once children have observed and played with worms, their fear of the squiggly-wiggles will quickly be dispelled.

We also included large rocks in our garden for our children and their friends to overturn; underneath they would find worms and grubs for fishing, along with centipedes and salamanders.

In the heat of the day, a wading pool and the sprinkler help to revive everyone's spirits.

### *Ready, Set, Go!*

If designed, planted and tended with loving care, a special garden reaps countless rewards. Above all, you will be giving your children the chance to make memories that will last a lifetime. ♥