

Blackberries for Toddlers

by Rusty Keeler

Imagine you are 18 months old, walking around outside, investigating your world. Ah, sunlight, a gentle breeze, birds chirping overhead. A bug here. A leaf there. And then you come to the delightfully yummy berry bush. (A loving adult has shown you this bush before. You know it's safe). You see the fat berries, reach your little fingers in between the leaves to pluck one out. And mmm. That tastes good! You want another, and another.

Well, that was the story for my little 18-month-old son this summer. Our yard is wild with trees, bushes, gardens, wildflowers, and mint patches. One of the highlights for young JJ was the peak of the blackberry season with two abundant bushes filled with berries. He returned again and again, talking about them every time we went outside. "Blackberries. More berries!" It was a rich experience that he savored and looked forward to. It dawned on me: Why couldn't every child have access to a berry bush? Why couldn't every space for children have edible plants? They can!

But aren't berry bushes prickly? Couldn't a small child get hurt? Isn't that dangerous?



Yes, Rusty Keeler designs and builds natural playscapes all over the place. But lately he's been busy playing with his fun toddling toddler Julian James. YEAH! Check out his website (www.earthplay.net) for more ideas, articles, and good natural play stuff.

Yes. And no. And maybe.

Like so many elements of a rich outdoor (and indoor) environment, it is up to us as adults to make decisions about whether certain risks for children are worth the benefit of the activity. That goes for tall block-building in the classroom, climbing up slides on the playground, and yes, whether to have a berry bush. It, of course, depends on your circumstances, your children, and your supervision style and care. And it may seem counterintuitive to put something like berry bushes together with little kids, but I'm here to say I've seen it with my own eyes: a toddler can be okay with even the prickliest of pricklies and gain a multitude of rewards and developmental benefits along the way — let alone the sweet taste of local, fresh, whole, fruity food.

As my son approached the plants, I watched him:

- Perform serious concentration to scout and locate the berries.
- Deeply focus as he reached into the plant between thorns and leaves toward a berry, taking care to watch out for the sharp parts. (I pointed the thorns out to him and talked to him about it many times. He understood and said, "sharp" and was very careful when reaching in).
- Take a single berry delicately between a finger and thumb and pluck (developing his fine-motor skills).

- Taste the berry and feel its unique shape and character in the mouth: a rush of sensory experience.
- Discern the ripeness of a berry by its color (by tart trial and error of course!). Purple-black means ready. Red apparently means not ready.

I was amazed as I watched my son create a new mental map of our yard with the blackberry bush as one of the important features — where it hadn't been weeks and months before. He now made sure to visit it daily. He knew right where it was and which way to go to get there. And then one learns that seasons come to an end; that all things change. And at some point the berries are done. That's it. The bush is still there in its place on the map, but the time for ripe berries is over. That's learning. That's *living*.

Could you do it? It doesn't take lots of space. You could do a planting this spring.

Would you feel comfortable?

How would you introduce it, help children learn about plants, and what's safe to eat?

Could you be the one to teach children in your care?



Could you teach that food comes not only from grocery stores, but from the earth? Amazing and true.

And could you teach that some plants are sharp and that you should be careful, but that there is still a sweet pay-off?

What if you planted a patch of berries in one far away corner of your yard? You could make that the berry patch — a fine place to visit, investigate, and taste. A bush like that grows back every year, you know. You could start with one plant, some soil, parent volunteers to plant, and then let the children give it water as it grows. Did you know there are also thornless blackberry bushes? You could try those. Or how about blueberries? It all depends on where you live and what likes to grow there. Worried about small berries and choking? Maybe you plant the berries in your preschool yard for the older children. Or maybe you decide that your edible plant should be an apple tree. Or a pear or a plum tree — with the added bonus of future climbability. What are the risks? What are the benefits?

It really doesn't matter exactly what you plant — it only matters that you plant. Give it a try. A cluster of corn makes a fine seasonal sensory environment. So does a bean tipi. Or a pumpkin patch. Or a good ol' blackberry bush. Yum!

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