



Planting the Seeds

Life Lessons from the Garden

by Carol B. Hillman

Getting your hands dirty and feeling okay about it is part of a good beginning for young children. By their very nature, both physically and emotionally, young children are close to the earth. They have, as part of who they are, an innate curiosity about the world around them, and a special leaning towards what they see on the ground. Young children are both explorers and investigators, and we adults — parents, caregivers, grandparents, other family members, teachers,



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and older siblings — can take many pointers from them.

It is both refreshing and rewarding to see the world anew through the eyes of young children. There is an utter fascination for a dust bunny found underneath the bed, a shiny bottle cap spotted on a city sidewalk, or a mouse dropping discovered on the kitchen floor. In their minds there is no such thing as an untouchable — everything calls out to be examined; soft or hard, tiny or small, clean or dirty, whatever is found beneath or around them, wherever young children live.

And, it is the coming together of all these extraordinary drives of natural curiosity, boldness, and learning through their senses that they apply themselves to create this magical partnership of young children and the earth.

Four decades ago I moved to a farm. There I inherited an area of untamed raspberry bushes, and not far away a huge

patch of rhubarb stood calling for attention. I wanted to have a good-sized space to grow our own vegetables and flowers. In time, the ground surrounding the rhubarb was tilled, compost was added, and a new growing space was born.

Having that space has changed my life. It has given me both a new perspective and a deeper appreciation for what having one's own piece of earth can mean. Having a garden is like many things in life: it can be more or less than what it appears to be. It can be meaningful on many layers — aesthetically, intellectually, and emotionally. It is from having *and working* that particular piece of land that I have come to realize how gardening encompasses all the time-honored principles of early childhood education. With gardening, young children are learning how to think and plan ahead, how to organize what 'tools' are needed for a particular project. They are taking responsibility for living things, and caring for their plants in a consistent way, on a daily basis. Young children can feel empowered

by seeing the fruits of their labor, and thus recognize the value of *work*. And, in sharing the bounty from their labors, they can gain the satisfaction of being an active part of a family or community of learners. Finally, they will have the experience of knowing that every living thing must eventually be put to rest, that despite their wishes that it be otherwise, that it is the way of the world.

A garden can be anywhere: a child care center, a pre-k or kindergarten classroom, a nursery school, at a babysitter's house, or wherever young children live. It can be on a small parcel of earth anywhere across rural America, or in a window box in any crowded urban center. If it is yours, if you take ownership in a thoughtful way, it can be a life-changing force.

Because the farm has always been a family gathering place, my thoughts often centered around what my grandchildren, grandnephews, and grandniece would like to do when they visited. There were a myriad of things to catch their eyes and attention: running through the tall meadow grasses, going exploring at the beaver pond, taking turns with a net to catch butterflies, overturning logs in the woods to search for red efts, or making strawberry ice cream. However, the one intriguing activity that captivated their imaginations was just plain digging in the earth.

My partner Robert and I had set aside an area, over by the now-tamed raspberry bushes, where nothing was allowed to be planted. It came to be known as the digging garden. To enhance the experience for the children, we purchased child-sized garden hoes, rakes, and shovels, as well as child-sized work gloves, which were only sometimes used. Unbeknownst to the youngsters, we had carefully buried, not too deep, and not too shallow, artifacts that, over the years, were unearthed on the farm. There were shards of old pottery, glass

bottles in various stages of disrepair, and all manner of fragments of wrought iron pieces of farm implements and equipment. Each family spent hours working together. Sometimes the two families were there at the same time, negotiating which tool to dig with, and carving out where each child could dig. On one occasion Cooper, a neighbor's Golden Retriever, joined in, and even he unearthed a treasure. By design, adults were not present; this was their children's work, their favorite spot, their sacred ground. In some small measure, the children's dedication to digging has helped reinforce my belief in the innate connection between young children and gardening.

A garden can start long before a garden is actually planted. It can start in many different ways. Wherever you are, just dreaming about a garden can be a quiet beginning. In the city or the country, your dreams can travel with you. Visiting a plant nursery, going inside a warm greenhouse, and walking down the rows of tiny plants and emerging flowers can be a place where a garden begins. Going to a neighborhood supermarket and looking over the racks of seed packets, with their colorful illustrations, could be another place where a garden starts to take shape. Perhaps that packet of seeds could spark an idea to grow peas, just like the families had for dinner the night before. Some inspiration might come from the child care center, Head Start, or a early learning classroom that young children attend. Here a group of children could be given an earth-colored peat pot. Here they could learn how to fill the small pot with soil, make a hole in the bottom of the pot with a pencil, and then carefully drop in a marigold seed or two. Then, just as carefully, learn how to cover the seed with soil and sprinkle it with water.

And so, the initial impetus to plant a garden can come from a variety of sources. This could also include picture

books about flower or vegetable plants like Gene Zion's *The Plant Sitter* or Ruth Krauss's *The Carrot Seed*.

An underlying factor, as Rachel Carson so eloquently expressed in *The Silent Spring*, is the companionship of a caring adult who wants to foster this bonding of young children with nature.

Within this entire framework lies a certain amount of organization, planning, clear thought, *work*, and dedication. It requires the vision of caring adults to thoughtfully guide youngsters along a chosen path, to pick just the right time to introduce them to what may, both now and in the future, become even more wondrous moments and experiences.

Many years ago I read a short article in a publication put out by The Bronx Botanical Garden. The essence of the story is firmly planted in my mind. In the early 1900s, in a poor section of the Bronx, a beloved teacher, Miss Fitzgerald, was talking to her kindergarten class about plants. After class a small boy, who I will call Sammy, came to her and said, "I want you to come and see my garden." That afternoon after school the two walked hand in hand to Sammy's home among a row of tenement houses. The two, student and teacher, sat for some time talking on the front steps. Eventually, Miss Fitzgerald asked to see Sammy's garden. Together they walked to a small backyard, overgrown with grasses and weeds. Miss Fitzgerald was puzzled because she couldn't see any garden. Then Sammy led her to a far corner of the yard, and there, almost hidden from view, was one lone bean plant that he had planted. Later Miss Fitzgerald came to learn that at dinner one night that week Sammy's mother had served green beans, and she had tied a white string around Sammy's bean, so that he could have the pleasure of eating his own home-grown produce.

In today's world, sad but true, we must begin our thinking about the importance of introducing our youngsters to the natural world by just getting them outside and taking leave of their electronic devices. This movement begins with parents, teachers, and all caregivers. We need to expose young children to the natural world, give them all the time in the world to play and play and play outside. Let a good portion of their comfort and security, along with their sense of inquiry, come in large part from these early experiences in nature. Keep technology at bay for as long as possible, so that youngsters can intuitively know that there is always the beauty of nature to turn towards as technology becomes more and more present in their lives.

Let them experience and discover in small measure some of the complexities and mysteries that nature has to offer: Let them ponder what happens to a puddle of rain on the sidewalk after the sun comes out, or where mud comes from, or what happens when they bring a snowball into a heated room. It is a matter of getting acquainted — whether in the city or the country — with the earth, the sky, and water. It is seeing, hearing, touching, and sometimes tasting what is around, that continually builds a reservoir of experiences to help young children navigate their lives.

Having, at some point in time, come up with the notion of what your garden is to be, the next step would be to gather the 'tools' that young children need. If your space will be a windowsill or the balcony of your apartment, then your tools can easily be brought together. A container for seeds can be chosen from a wide variety of things: a flowerpot of plastic or terra cotta, a paper cup, a cut-off paper or plastic milk jug, a tin can, a peat pot, or any manner of wooden boxes, depending on the size you want your garden to be.

The one requirement for your garden container is that it needs to have a hole or two for drainage. Next you will need to purchase a bag of potting soil from a local nursery, or, if you have friends who live in the country, ask them to fill a plastic bag of good rich soil for you. To fill the containers, a metal kitchen spoon will get the job done, and it will be easy for young children to handle. Now the only remaining equipment needed is something with which to sprinkle the seeds with water. You can create a watering can with any kind of jar with multiple holes on top, like a spice jar or a cylindrical tin shaker for adding confectioners' sugar to a cake. A watering can could also be a sprayer bought at the local hardware store, which mists seeds or young plants in a gentle manner.

If your planting place is in a rural setting, then the preparation of the soil is the primary focus. Young children can help the adults involved by using small hoes, rakes, and shovels to clear the area of wild grass, weeds, and stones. This is the time for really getting into the job, wearing old clothes, getting down on your hands and knees, getting your hands dirty, getting your clothes dirty, and clearing a place to plant your seeds or young seedlings.

Spring, summer, and fall are the times for being outdoors as much as possible, tending your very own garden. This is the time for keeping the weeds at bay, picking off the insects that are nibbling away at your plants, putting compost or fertilizer around them to nourish your very own crops. In the beginning of the growing season, young children can learn that watering everything you are growing on a daily basis is part of a gardener's job. Doing all of this is part of taking ownership of your own piece of earth. It can be a personal investment that young children make when they decide to both plant *and* work a garden.

From beginning to end, from thinking about, organizing and gathering the 'tools' that are needed, planting and tending the plants during the growing process, and then reaping the fruits of their labor, young children learn in a satisfying way what the value of commitment can mean.

All of this helps young children become responsible human beings and caregivers at an early age, and in their own right. And, when the fall turns to winter, and the growing season comes to an end, there is the recognition that the plants, just like every living thing, have a limited time to flourish and live, and it is time to put the garden to bed until the spring returns.

One of my fondest wishes is that every Sammy and Samantha across our country, if not the world, could have an opportunity, wherever they live, to have the pleasure of being a gardener. Let them be stewards of the Earth, be it on a farm, within a paper cup, or almost hidden in the backyard of a tenement house.

