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## Kids in the Garden: Developing Skills for a Sustainable Future

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Kids love dirt—digging in it, throwing it, tasting it and sitting in it. And there is plenty of time left this summer to use that natural inclination for creating important learning moments. When my colleague’s son was six, he took his nine-year-old friend out to the garden to look for snacks and as they pulled carrots the friend held up a luscious orange beauty and announced proudly, “So this is how they grow!”

Innate curiosity, paired with fun, can help establish a love of the earth in children, and hopefully a subsequent desire to grow their own food. Imagine being three-feet high and harvesting ears in a magical forest of corn stalks twice your height. Sustainable skills for the future can be naturally acquired by letting kids loose to explore the world of gardening.

Gardening is just one of the great ideas in Sharon Astyk’s new book on sustainable living, *Making Home: Adapting Our Homes and Our Lives to Settle in Place*. Astyk is a teacher, writer and farmer whose family uses 80% less energy and resources than the average American household. Astyk encourages us to become resilient and use the tools we already have to ensure access to the food we need, even in the face of rising prices. In doing so, she writes, we are also assured of food purity.

Astyk explains that people who live in poverty are often unable to afford the abundance of food available in local markets. *Making Home* offers solutions, of which gardening is one. Growing our own food, and in particular gardening with our kids, is one way to build both self-sufficiency and family. She advocates that children need good work that is developmentally appropriate, and they should know why the work matters. Children who

garden with adults will feel proud of their role and can share in the rewards. Even *during* work. Weeding is sweeter while snacking on sugar snap peas or cherry tomatoes. Whether you have raised beds or traditional plots, containers on the patio or balcony, a tiny window box or a share in a community garden, children can be part of the process.

A real-life example of Asytk's philosophy is found at [Saanich Organics](#), a farmer-run food grower and distributor on southern Vancouver Island, where kids garden alongside moms and staff. They can be seen picking up small rocks and hauling them away in bright plastic wheelbarrows or, as one three-year-old was spied doing, quietly harvesting cucumbers on his own.

Kids can begin gardening with a small area of their own in the main garden, or with their own container on a sunny porch. A Mesclun lettuce mix makes a good starter crop—it germinates quickly, is best eaten young (no need to wait!), and has all sorts of leaf shapes. Radishes and carrots come up fast and, for fun, there are rainbow-coloured varieties available. Pole beans are a blast, as kids can see tendrils coil around and up the trellis. If you have the space, a bean teepee made from tall stakes is the ultimate—just leave a wider gap between two of the stakes so your small gardener can crawl inside.

Strawberry urns are interesting with berries growing and hanging out of the holes, or stick a few plants in a hanging basket for a similar effect (the most important effect of course is *eating* the berries). And digging potatoes is like hunting for buried treasure; it's such a surprise how many spuds are under the soil, and it is good hands-on work. If you've got the space they're worth planting just for the experience of harvesting.

Then there are sunflowers; Russian *giganteus* grow twelve feet tall with dinner-plate sized faces and you can toast the seeds. Growing sprouts in a mason jar on the kitchen counter is yet another way to garden ([see our blog 02/02/12](#)). Gardening in its many forms is a positive step in building a child's connection with where their meals come from while developing skills for future food security. If you have experiences of gardening with children that you'd like to share, please do so in the comments section below.