

**USDA FNS People's Garden School Garden Pilot Project:  
Healthy Gardens, Healthy Youth  
Gardening Tips for Working with Kids**

The following tips are from HGHY Master Gardeners and site leaders and are based on their experiences gardening with kids. These are tips for both school and the summer programs.

**Be Prepared**

1. Send home information about the garden program including the details about who is leading the program, what the kids will be doing, where the gardens are located, when the kids will be gardening, what is happening with the garden produce, and expectations of the young gardeners. All gardeners should be wearing close-toed shoes and have sun protection. They will not be allowed to work in the garden or with food if they are sick or have been sick within the last 24 hours.
2. Every time you go to the garden, take supplies such as a first aid kit, wet wipes, water jug with cups (or have kids bring their own water) and water for washing the produce.
3. Use lesson plans and educational resources to prepare for each session. Play a game, sing a song, act out a play, read a book, or make a garden-based craft each session. Remember to have fun! See the Sample Garden Session outline at the end of these tips.

**Working With the Kids**

4. Make sure the young gardeners know the 3 R's garden rules: Respect, Responsibility, Readiness.
5. Be fully prepared before heading to the garden so there will be little down time for the kids. The tools and any supplies should be easy to access and ready to go. Break large groups into manageable sizes. Have more than one activity and rotate them. Keep every child busy and on task or their attention will shift and they will drift. Have enough adult supervision to make this happen.
6. Always demonstrate before letting the kids work on their own. The more adult helpers you have to float around and guide the kids, the better. Do not do things for the kids, show them how and have them show you how back.
7. Check their work. Don't take their word for it when they say they have completed a task. You might find that things were missed.
8. Take frequent shade and water breaks. Break times are good times to introduce healthy snacks, books, garden journals, or other hands-on activities.
9. Every child will appreciate some one-on-one time with instructors while working in the garden. Let them tell their stories and show you the weeds they found and pulled, etc.

**Planning the Garden**

10. Use the hands-on, deeply aligned classroom lessons to help the students plan their gardens. The kids will have fun learning and taking ownership of the garden. They will get excited about choosing what to plant and how much they need to plant by doing these lessons. A Master Gardener or an experienced gardener is a valuable resource to help kids discover what crops can be grown in the climate and in the amount of space they will have to garden. Start a Garden Journal or Garden Records right away.

11. Young students are not able to prepare the site for gardening. Master Gardeners and others can provide leadership for that. FFA students, parents, Ameri-Corps, Food Corps, garden clubs, retired teachers, neighbors and others have been instrumental in preparing the gardens and helping the youth in the planning stages.

12. For the young children, have the sections of the garden already measured out and marked according to the garden plan. For the older youth, help them measure and mark the garden sections.

13. Kids like to use garden tools, but they LOVE to use child-sized tools such as kid-sized rakes, hoes, shovels, watering cans, and gloves. The type of garden tools they need depend on the type of garden they will be working with and how it is planted – square foot vs. rows. They can share tools. Older students have been using adult-sized tools and even tools that have been loaned by Master Gardener groups.

14. Master Gardeners and FFA members are using their green houses to start seeds and grow transplants for the school gardens.

15. Help the students start a compost bin and get the whole school involved.

### **Planting**

16. Go over tool safety rules for hoes, trowels, and rakes. A tool safety game is part of the gardening curriculum.

17. Go over ways the plants in your garden are going to be planted: seeds, sets, transplants, seed pieces.

18. Plant fast growing (cool season) crops like radishes and spinach for early satisfaction. Try to stagger your crops for constant harvest opportunities. Make sure the students will have something to harvest when they return to school in the fall.

### **Maintaining**

#### **Watering**

19. Watering is extremely important, especially in raised bed gardens. If you are meeting just once a week, you may have to make plans for additional watering. Families, youth groups, organizations, neighbors can sign up for times. Someone will need to be responsible to make sure the watering plans are carried out.

20. Using a watering wand is a good way to water the garden. Show how to water at the base of the plant. Teach the kids to count how long it takes to water a plant.

## Weeding

21. Help the kids distinguish the difference between weeds and garden plants. Show them how to pull weeds so that the garden plants are not disturbed. Tell them where you want them to put the weeds. Have challenges such as finding the biggest weed, most unusual weed, most weeds, etc. Talk about why some parts of the gardens have more weeds than other parts, etc.

## Insects and pests

22. Insects intrigue and scare children. They enjoy doing the lessons about pests and going on hunting missions to find and eradicate them. Getting to show everyone the squash bug they found – and sometimes their eggs – is a joy in and of itself!

23. Use the lessons to identify “good guys” and “bad guys” in the garden and to figure out what to do about them. Then help the kids take the next steps to protect their garden from unwanted pests.

## **Harvesting, Preparing and Eating the Produce!**

24. Kids get excited when they see fruits/vegetables growing on the plants. Make sure that they show everyone by pointing and not picking! Describe what to look for to determine when the fruits/vegetables are ready to harvest.

25. Show kids HOW to harvest produce gently. For example, gently hold a bean plant before pulling off the bean, cut the lettuce with scissors, etc.

26. Kids love to harvest and taste the bounty. Try to include this in every lesson.

27. Include in the lesson, ideas for how the food can be eaten. Simple recipes such as cucumber-flavored water, radish or veggie sandwiches, veggies with dip, cucumbers and onions in vinegar, etc. are the best. Get a large bottle of Ranch dressing because the kids will try anything they can dip! There are several ideas in the lessons.

28. Show the whole vegetable before cutting it open. Have them find the seeds.

29. Plastic plates and knives can be used for cutting and preparing produce.

30. Help the kids put their gardens to bed.

## Sample Gardening Session

1. Meet in gathering area
  - a. Remind everyone about behavior expectations.
  - b. Chat a bit – What’s up?
  - c. Give garden plan for the day
  - d. Split into smaller groups if necessary
  - e. Have a planned garden activity for each group with an adult supervisor
2. Garden projects
  - a. Planting
  - b. Weeding
  - c. Pest patrol
  - d. Watering
  - e. Harvesting
  - f. Washing
  - g. Cutting (if necessary)
3. Snack time
  - a. Make their own snacks
  - b. If there is nothing to harvest, consider produce from farmer’s markets
  - c. Focus on fruits and vegetables
  - d. Send ideas home to the families
4. Activity session – see lessons for ideas for games, songs, stories, plays, crafts
5. Go home!