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Dig In!

How Does Your Garden Grow?

By Nancy Mann Jackson

mORE THAN 7 million Americans broke the soil for a new garden in 2009, and 21 percent of them had never gardened before, according to the National Gardening Association (NGA). Even the White House became home to its own backyard vegetable garden. This year, gardeners in the know expect to see more fruits and vegetables sprouting up in backyards and patio containers across the nation.

Why Grow a Garden?

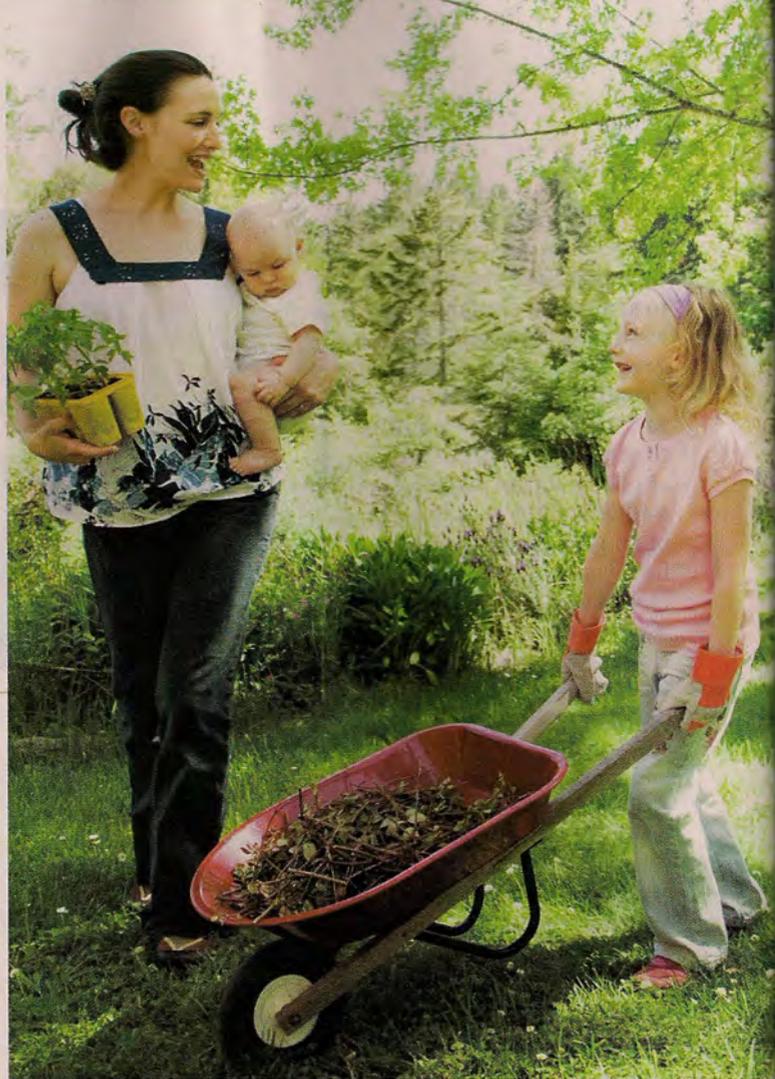
For some families, growing their own food is a budget decision. Seeds and a little sweat equity is cheaper than buying fresh (or canned or frozen) produce. For instance, "One \$3 tomato plant may produce 15 pounds of tomatoes," says Jodi Torpey, author of *The Colorado Gardener's Companion* (Globe Pequot, 2007) who blogs about gardening at WesternGardeners.com. "At the store, those tomatoes might cost \$1 per pound."

Homegrown foods also taste better and can be the catalyst for healthier eating habits. Forget burgers and french fries; there is

no "faster" food than the food you can pluck off the plant in your backyard, walk inside, and eat. Plenty of evidence suggests that kids who help grow fruits and vegetables often make healthier food choices.

Along with saving money and eating healthier, today's families also are concerned about food security, thanks to product recalls on everything from spinach to peanut butter. Many parents are interested in finding ways to get their children outside and connected with nature and in

Homegrown foods are cheaper and taste better.



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helping take better care of our environment. Torpey says "A convergence of these issues has caused people to revisit their priorities," and many have concluded that growing a garden offers an opportunity to tackle most of these issues all at once.

Getting Started

Before breaking ground for your garden, carefully plan what you will plant and where you will put it. Check with local county extension agents or master gardeners to find out which plants grow best in your local soil. What you plant "depends a lot on where you are located and the soil and space available," says Mike Metallo, president of the National Gardening Association (NGA) in South Burlington, Vermont. "But the best food to start with is probably kids' favorite foods or things that interest them."

Alison Kerr, who gardens with her family in Kansas and blogs about it at LovingNaturesGarden.com, says some of the easiest vegetables to grow include lettuce, radishes, and tomatoes in the spring and summer and cabbages and greens in the fall. "And kids seem to love growing things that are really small, like mini-tomatoes, or really big, like sunflowers." Planting sunflowers or other flowers such as zinnias is a good idea, "as they will attract bees, which are necessary to pollinate some plants," Torpey says. Other favorites for new gardeners include cucumbers, beans, beets, and squash.

If you do not have a large patch of soil available, grow your garden in containers. Many vegetables come in

smaller varieties that are perfect for container gardening, such as Space-master cucumbers and Tiny Tim tomatoes.

But do not plant too much, especially when you are just starting out, because it is easy to get overwhelmed when the produce starts ripening. And

once you get your hands dirty planting a garden, you want to be sure and stick around for the tasty results.

Nancy Mann Jackson is a freelance writer who blogs about gardening with her own family. Be sure to stop by her blog GrowingFoodandKids.com.

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GETTING KIDS EXCITED

Make the family gardening project appealing to the youngest member of your family with these tips for getting him involved and keeping him engaged.

- **Make it fun.** While gardening is a learning experience, it should not be all business. Let your child choose his own favorite plants to cultivate and let him get dirty while doing it.

- **Let your child help.** Kids usually want to do what you are doing, even if it is working the dirt with a sharp-edged hoe or using a motorized tiller. Some garden implements may be too sharp or dangerous for children, but when it is safe and your child is interested in what you are doing, let him give it a try. With your help, your child can learn to do a lot of things. And when he is interested and feeling challenged, that is the time to get him hooked.

- **Set reasonable expectations.** While your child may be a great helper in the garden, remember that he is just a child and may not last as long as you do at any given task. Giving your child structure and responsibility can be good for him, but if you want him to like gardening with you, remember his attention span can be brief.

- **Share the rewards.** There is nothing like the taste of just-picked food. Why not let your child sample it at its freshest? But do not stop there. Serve your homegrown veggies at mealtimes, and if you have some left over, preserve it to eat throughout the year. Every garden helper should get to enjoy the fruits of his labor.



LEARN MORE ABOUT GARDENING

An array of print and online resources is available to help you get your garden started and keep it growing.

- National Gardening Association — www.garden.org
- WesternGardeners.com
- LovingNaturesGarden.com
- GrowingFoodandKids.com
- *Ready, Set, Grow! A Kid's Guide to Gardening* by Rebecca Spohn (Good Year Books, 2007)
- *Gardening With Kids* by Catherine Woram, Martyn Cox, and Polly Wreford (CICO Books, 2008)
- *The Veggie Gardener's Answer Book* by Barbara W. Ellis (Storey Publishing, LLC., 2008)
- County Extension publications — Call your local county extension office for free, research-based information specific to growing things in your locale.



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