



## Gardening With Children

by *Sussex County Master Gardener Judy Pfister*

As many gardeners know, plants need a dormancy period to get ready for the coming growing months and so do people.

As the cold and darkness of winter closes in around us, you may think that now is not an appropriate time of year to be thinking of gardening with children or grandchildren.

Children may be restless when winter approaches so December through February is the perfect time to start awakening your child's interest in the world around them.



Sussex County Master Gardener Jessica Clark Photo

**Child observing insect damage on plants with a hand lens called a Botanist Loupe**

As you and your child plan a spring garden, consider that gardening includes environmental science, knowledge of birds

### Easy Plant Starters

Some of the easiest plants to start from seed include sunflowers, lettuces, and mesclun (a mixture of young tender salad greens such as chervil, endive and lettuces, arugula and chicory), radishes; snow peas, carrots, and zinnias. Most of these seeds, with the exception of carrots, can be sown indoors to get a head start on the growing season. Some, such as lettuce, mesclun and radishes can be completely grown and harvested on a windowsill or under a grow light. Sunflowers can be started in a recycled pot that can be planted in the ground at the proper time.

### Recycled Containers

What do you sow these seeds in? This is where the environmental science comes in. Use as many recycled containers as possible, including yogurt cups, newspaper planting pots or egg cartons. There are many internet resources including how-to YouTube videos. My favorite resource is [kidsgardening.org](https://kidsgardening.org) where an entire section is devoted to the concept of Reduce/Reuse/Recycle and is available at <https://kidsgardening.org/>

and mammals, composting and recycling, as well as growing and harvesting vegetables.

December is a wonderful time to introduce children to birds through their different features, migratory patterns, and food sources culminating in the Big Backyard Count from February 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup>. For more information, visit

[www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org). An excellent publication is “10 Plants for a Bird-Friendly Yard” which encourages planting native plants that provide essential food sources and shelter for birds, especially those threatened by the changing climate. Visit <https://www.audubon.org/news/10-plants-bird-friendly-yard> for more information.

In January, when the glossy, color gardening catalogs start arriving, what child does not like cutting out pictures and pasting them into a “garden plot” as a planning exercise? This offers an opportunity to teach about growing times, germination, light requirements – all of which are usually listed in the catalogs.

As spring approaches the seeds are going to need a home outside. A key tip is to give each child their own space to grow and the smaller the child, the smaller the area. Ownership of an area or crop is key for maintaining interest and building responsibility throughout the growing season. Large pots are great for small children as the soil is good, they almost cannot be overwatered, thinning is easier and you set your child up for success.

Don't overlook seed tapes for small seeds like carrots as it can save a lot of time not having to thin out plants and they are much easier for children to handle. Radishes, inter-planted with other plants, provide reassurance to children that something is growing as they only take three to five days to germinate. Radishes can be harvested young before the other plants need the root space.

## Delaware Cooperative Extension



**Delaware State  
University**

Cooperative Extension Education in Agriculture, 4-H and Home Economics, Delaware State University, University of Delaware and United States Department of Agriculture cooperating, Dr. Cherese Winstead, Dean and Administrator. It is the policy of Delaware Cooperative Extension that no person shall be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of race, color, sex, disability, age, or national origin.

garden-activities-reducing-reusing-and-recycling-in-the-garden/. All this recycling and reusing leads up to Earth Day on April 22<sup>nd</sup>. This year, try to do a project together as a family.

## Winter Months

Use the winter months to get outside with your children and grandchildren to explore the seasonal changes. Gardeners of all ages learn valuable lessons through their observation and interaction with nature. Sharing these experiences with children will lead to some very interesting conversations.

If they ask a question for which you do not have an answer, call the Master Gardener helpline. Sussex County (302)856-2585 X535 or Kent County (302) 730-4000, or New Castle County (302)831-8862.

For more information about Master Gardener workshops, garden helplines, presentations, becoming a Master Gardener Volunteer, or other activities, please visit these websites.

UD Website - <https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/environmental-stewardship/master-gardeners/>

DSU Website- <https://cast.desu.edu/cooperative-extension/agriculture-natural-resources/delaware-master-gardeners>