

home



FAVORITE THING
Coffee service
Italian-style **877**



Gardening workshops are offered at the Long Island Children's Museum in Garden City, left. At Wyandanch's Martin Luther King Elementary School, above, Shirley Roberts and Dayan Jimenez tend to a garden as part of an after-school program.

BY CATHERINE DUFFY
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THE FLOWER OF YOUTH

How gardening can help children grow

Ever since there have been kids, there have been kids in the dirt.

And these days, that's a good thing. Charles Nordstaz, senior horticulturist at the National Gardening Association, says that *regenerative cultivators* about kids getting enough exercise and eating right has brought a new generation of children into the garden. "Gardening is a great way to take care of both of those issues," says Nordstaz, whose group encourages children's gardening through programs and the Web site, kidsgardening.com. "You're planting things, tending, stretching, moving your body."

Planting fruits and vegeta-

bles encourages young children to actually eat them, Nordstaz says. "Most children today don't have a sense of where their food comes from," he said. "It's amazing to see the progression on kids' faces when, for the first time, they eat a pea or a bean that they've actually grown."

Rosalee Doucette, a master gardener and coordinator of the

summer program at the Children's Garden at Cornell Cooperative Extension's Suffolk County Farm in Yaphank, says being in a garden allows kids to laugh from their busy daily lives and connect with nature. She describes "harvest parties" at the farm, in which children involved in the summer program get to pick the fruits and vegetables of their labor and eat them. "We pick tomatoes, chop herbs," she says. "And when they eat it, it comes together for them."

Curricula incorporating gardening are coming into the classroom more and more, Nordstaz says. "It's a way for a science teacher or a math teacher to present a different kind of learning. It's a lot more hands-on."

Carolanne Kaang, director of the cooperative extension's community and environmental horticulture, agrees. "We're getting more requests for advice on children's gardens in schools," she says. "There seems to be more interest."

Not just in school

They're also popular outside the classroom, everywhere from the Long Island Children's Museum in Garden City, where gardening workshops are offered, to the Clark Botanic Garden in Albemarle, which features children's organic gardening.

Doucette says that, beyond the obvious science kids glean from gardening, there are other benefits. "They learn math skills, weights and measures," Doucette says. "There's a lot of different skills that get incorporated. The students sometimes keep a journal about their gardens, so there are writing skills involved."

Research supports a link between children's gardens and learning. A 2003 study in the *Journal of the American Society for Horticultural Science* found that third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students who participated in school gardening activities scored significantly higher on science achievement tests than students who did not.

As far back as 1909, influential educator Maria Montessori found that gardening can help children appreciate nature,



learn responsibility, have better relationships and develop patience.

Growing with the plants

Larrik Farber, executive director and one of the founders of Scarborough Experiences, a Long Island-based nonprofit educational organization which will soon be moving into Huntington, has seen students grow

along with their seedlings in the after-school program she runs at the Martin Luther King Elementary School in Wyandanch.

The children's garden at the school began three years ago as an outgrowth of a nature program her group runs called Rangers of the Earth. "The fourth graders in the program wanted to start a garden, they wanted to get involved," Farber

says. To start the garden, she says, she made a list with the students to find out what plants they were interested in growing.

"Strawberries have been a big hit at the school, and Farber says the kids take pride in their harvests. "They know if they worked on it, they get to eat it," Farber says. "Our garden is not big enough that we'll ever be able to have a

C.J. Lala digs small holes before planting seeds at East Setauket's Nassaukeag school.

whole meal out of it. Usually, when things ripen, the kids want to eat them right out of the garden. And that's nice too."

Fifth graders in the gardening program say all the work has its rewards. "We get to go out and

HELPERS

■ Insect Lore's line of Backyard Bunch "tools for budding gardeners" has everything a child needs to get digging. The tools are sold separately, or in sets, and come in five whimsical character styles: Manny Mantis, Webster Spider, Flutter Butterfly, Buzzy Bee and Dot Ladybug. Each set contains a kneeling pad, kid's gloves, hand shovel and hand cultivator. The sets are available at retailers such as Target and Martin Viette Nurseries in East Norwich, through the Insect Lore catalog, and through its Web site at www.insectlore.com for \$19.99.



■ Target features a Dora the Explorer Gardening Pack with a cotton vision gloves, plastic cultivator and plastic trowel and kneepad, for \$16.99 at Target stores or through www.target.com.

■ Add for the young SpongeBob SquarePants fan, there's the SpongeBob Gardening Pack, with gloves, hat, trowel and cultivator for \$14.99 at Target stores or

through www.target.com.

■ Books on gardening with children are as plentiful as potatoes in summer, but this one is not the garden-variety kind. Or, maybe it is. "Roots, Shoots, Buckets & Boots: Gardening Together With Children" (Workman, \$13.95) is an excellent resource for gardening with sprouts in it.

author Sharon Lovejoy lists the top 20 plants for kids, including sunflowers and pumpkins, and gives instruction on creating these gardens such as a "snacking and sipping garden" and a "pizza patch."

—CATHERINE DUFFY

guy in the mud," says Shirley Roberts, 11. "We have to weed and put the wood chips in the walkway. But I feel other kids that it's fun."

Making friends

Eleven-year-old Dayan Jimenez, another student gardener, says making friends was one of the things she liked most about working in the garden. "We got to work together and we had fun doing it," Dayan says. "We got to know each other more."

Kiang, who coordinates Carroll's master gardener training program, sees another benefit to children's gardens: "They are another way for master gardeners to get involved and give back to the community, and that's what the master gardener program is all about."

For a successful children's garden, Nordstaz suggests keeping it fun for kids. "Don't get so wrapped up in having the wood-chip garden," he says. "Keep it limited in time. And don't be so attached to it being a success. Your measure of success is going to be different than a child's."

Kiang suggests that organizers of school gardens get a lot of people involved, from kids to parents to educators to community members. "There's a lot of work involved," she says.

Teamwork counts

Two gardens at Nassaukeag Elementary School in East Setauket are a testament to

much teamwork. Kindergarten teachers Jeanie Sommer and Mary Dolan hold breakfasts in their school's "Kinder-Garden" during which families donate plants, many of them from their home gardens. It has become like a family garden, Sommer says. "One mother brought in a sedum plant and said, 'This is from my daughter's granddaddy's garden.'"

The garden wouldn't exist as it does today — with bearded irises towering over lilies and hydrangeas — without the help of parents who donated their time, Sommer and Dolan say.

As the garden grows, Sommer says, the children notice. "They walk by it every day, and we read to them in the garden," Sommer says. "Their eyes light up when they see a new flower. They notice every change."



Go to www.newsday.com/home to read about why Ed, Jefferson 12-year student Michael Delish started a garden at a veterans' home, as well as a listing of gardening programs for children on Long Island.