

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

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PIZZA GARDENS FOR KIDS

Q. How can I get my children interested in helping in the vegetable garden, and in eating the vegetables that we grow?

A. Kids will be more than happy to work with you in the vegetable garden if they get to grow foods that they *like to eat*. It's all about motivation. Pizza gardens are a fun and educational way to get the kids outdoors and involved in gardening. Ask any child if they would like to create their own dinner in a pizza garden, and see their eyes light up. A pizza garden, simply put, is a vegetable and herb garden that contains ingredients for homemade pizza.

Tomatoes, sweet bell peppers, onions, basil, parsley and oregano are the basics. For this kind of starter vegetable garden with children, it's best to keep it simple with just a few types of plants, so it's more fun and less of a chore.

A round pizza shaped plot with 6 wedge shaped sections makes a fun and easy design. Some bamboo stakes and garden twine can be used to mark off the sections. Each wedge holds a different type of plant for the pizza.

Some families use an old kiddie pool filled with potting soil for a pizza garden. Whether you dig a new bed in your yard, or use the kiddie pool, have the soil tested by your County Extension office, so you know what nutrients the soil needs. Healthy and fertile soil makes for healthy plants. Blooming, fruiting colorful plants are what keep the children interested in maintaining the garden while they wait for the plants to mature. (A lesson in patience is an added benefit to this family project.)

Children love to dig in the dirt, so let them do the work. Some may prefer a pair of their own gardening gloves, but if they like to feel the soil and get a little dirt under their nails, let them! A little guidance from you on planting seedlings and sowing seed will be needed, but to see a vegetable or herb grow that they have personally planted is almost a miracle to a young child. The back of the seed packets tells you exactly how far apart to space the seeds, and how deep to plant them (usually not very deep).

Kids of any age can water the plants - just get a cute, kid sized watering can, and fill it just enough water from the hose so that is not too heavy for the child. Teach them the difference between the weeds and their own plants, and let them keep the plot weeded. While you are out in the garden together, you'll have an opportunity to point out birds and butterflies, caterpillars and earthworms. Here's a great time to tell the children how these animals and insects are useful for pollinating their garden, and ultimately are responsible for the growth of their pizza dinner.

"Roma" tomatoes are the usual variety for this garden, as they are not too juicy, and cook down to a delicious sauce. I like to plant one cherry tomato variety as well, so the children have something edible and delicious that will be ready a little sooner than the Romas. "Sweet 100",

“Sungold” or “Chocolate Cherry” are fun to eat and pretty to look at. Look for Sweet basil or Genovese basil, Greek oregano, Italian flat-leaf parsley, “Gypsy” sweet peppers (these have a little shorter maturing time), and sets of green bunching onions at the nursery.

Some of these can go into the ground a little sooner than others, so check the planting times on the labels. Your onion sets will be the first thing to be planted in the spring, since they don’t mind some cold. When it warms up a little more, the tomatoes, peppers and herbs can go in.

Though all of these plants can be found at nurseries and garden centers already growing in small pots, you can choose to grow some of them from seed. The best ingredients for sowing seeds would be the basil and parsley, as they mature faster than the vegetables. I like to get a quick start to the season by putting in healthy seedlings of the tomatoes and peppers, and the children like to have some growing plants in their pizza garden right away, as well. Plant the tomatoes deep, digging a hole deep enough to bury about half the plant in it. The long stem that goes into the ground will sprout roots right away, giving your tomato plant a good healthy boost from the get-go.

By mid-summer, your children will have learned a lot about gardening, about how food gets to the table, and they will have the satisfaction of knowing that their pizza came from their own hands (with help from Mother Nature and their Pizza Garden).

For more information about obtaining soil samples or growing vegetables visit the Carroll County Extension’s Master Gardener Office at the Ag Center, 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton or call 770-836-8546.