

Plots for Schoolchildren

Schools can use allotment plots to teach children a variety of subjects; horticulture and nutrition may now be part of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3 but a visit to an allotment site also offers opportunities to learn about history (topics such as World War II and rationing), geography, literacy, numeracy, art, design and technology, science and healthy lifestyles. See the links at the end of the leaflet for organisations that can offer advice and resources. The visit to the plot will also help children to see the importance of allotments to the local community and they will benefit from the knowledge and experience of the plot-holders; they will know what grows well on the site and when the latest frost occurs.

When teachers are planning activities and the growing schedule they will need to take in to account the fact that many crops are ready to pick during the summer break, when the children will not be visiting. However there are many fruit and vegetables that will mature within the school year.

Parent helpers are invaluable and a weeding rota during the summer break will help the school to avoid contravening their tenancy agreement by allowing the plot to become covered in weeds and spreading weed seeds to other plots.

Become a member of The National Allotment Society

Membership of The National Allotment Society comes with a raft of benefits, from discounts on horticultural products through to initial legal advice and horticultural expertise. To become a member visit www.nsalg.org.uk or call **01536 266576**.

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Healthy eating

Children who have planted seeds and watch a crop develop are much more likely to eat vegetables routinely and establish healthy eating habits that will last in to adulthood. Radishes and carrots pulled from the ground, washed and eaten immediately are delicious and nothing beats a freshly picked sweetcorn cob; they can even be eaten raw.

Contact with Nature

Current research has confirmed that children who have regular contact with the natural environment do better at school and have an increased ability to deal with life events. They are also likely to retain an appreciation of and concern for the environment as adults.

Today's children are the plot-holders of the future.

uk.pinterest.com/growveg/love-kids-gardening/

www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/gardening_with_children/

www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/wellbeing-benefits-fr-nat-env-report-290915-final-lo.pdf

www.rspb.org.uk/Images/everychildoutdoors_tcm9-259689.pdf

www.gardenorganic.org.uk/schools



Taking your children to the plot



As an increasing number of families rent plots and garden together and benefit from access to healthy food, exercise and contact with nature, this leaflet examines ways of ensuring that their time at the plot is enjoyable and safe.

The majority of allotment sites now welcome families and taking your children or grandchildren down to the plot is a great way of helping them to understand how food is produced and allowing them to spend time outdoors, getting some healthy exercise. Very few children are able to free-range in our risk adverse society but an allotment site can offer them some of the freedom and experiences that previous generations enjoyed.

However there are particular dangers on allotment sites that cannot be ignored and children must be taught to respect plot boundaries and not venture on other plots without the permission of the plot-holder.

Health and safety

The simplest way of protecting your children is to ensure that you have assessed and reduced risks on your plot.

- Have you capped all bamboo canes?
- Are any chemicals and seeds stored in appropriate child-proof containers out of small children's reach?
- Have you ensured that any water on your plot is safely covered?
- Are sharp tools stored out of the way?
- Have you cleared the plot of debris? e.g. rusty metal, broken glass that may have been left by previous plot-holders.
- Are tetanus injections up to date?

Many seeds, bulbs and leaves – e.g. rhubarb leaves, are poisonous to eat, so always supervise younger children and inform more independent children.

However cuts and grazes will happen and insects will bite so it is a good idea to keep a basic first aid kit of anti-septic wipes, plasters and anti-histamine cream at the ready; not forgetting the sun protection cream for delicate skins.

Remember to always wash children's hands before they eat on the plot, the odd bit of garden soil may not harm them but allotment soil may have been exposed to manure that is likely to contain E.Coli bacteria, which can survive for up to six months in the ground.

What Associations need to consider

The Occupiers Liability Acts 1984 and 1957 both apply to allotments sites and an occupier must be prepared for the fact that children will be less careful than adults. This means, in practice, if there is something on the site such as machinery, a pond or bright berries, this may constitute a 'trap' to a child; if the child is then injured by the 'trap' the occupier will often be liable. With regards to signage, you cannot absolve your responsibilities; however, as an occupier, your Association would be under a duty to erect a notice warning visitors to the site of any immediate danger.

Gardening tasks are a wonderful opportunity for children to learn



Boundaries

Talking to fellow plot-holders is a great way for your children to socialise and learn but many people come to the plot for a bit of peace and quiet, so do be sensitive to their needs. Other plots may also present dangers out of your control, such as broken glass or tools and materials left lying around or unlocked sheds with chemicals that children can get their hands on.

Children may also trample on growing areas; very young children are unlikely to recognise a seed bed and, tempting as they will be, please teach your children not to help themselves to those succulent strawberries on the plot next to the path!

Early learning

Weeding together or picking produce can give you the opportunity to have a relaxed chat with your child; children will often open up when the focus is on something other than them. Be prepared to garden in short bursts with young children and make a game out of the task in hand.

Gardening tasks are a wonderful opportunity for children to learn, they can – experience the different smells, tastes and textures of plants, witness the cycle of the seasons, measure the growth of seedlings, count the number of caterpillars and weigh the strawberry crop. For advice on designing a children's allotment and some allotment games take a look at the National Allotment Society website www.nsalg.org.uk/growing-advice/how-to-plan-an-allotment/design-a-childrens-allotment/

Your child may be more interested in making mud pies, collecting worms, digging pointless holes or building a pile of stones but these are valuable childhood pastimes and only to be encouraged.

Older children may be reluctant to leave their iPad and venture outdoors but why not exploit their IT skills and enlist them to help plan your plot and growing schedule, using one of the many on-line apps available. Helping to bring their creation to life and the prospect of eating some of the produce may then lure them down to the plot.



A Plot of Their Own

Providing children with a small area of the plot that they can look after will encourage them to feel independent and plan for themselves; perhaps using one of the themes below. Raised beds make an area easier to manage and smaller children may appreciate child sized tools.

World garden plot the mini-plot could be divided up in to continents and planted up with appropriate plants.

Asia – carrots, peas, spinach

Mediterranean – radish, broccoli, parsnips, rosemary
Northern Europe – cabbage, lettuce, sprouts, kale, parsley, turnips

America – squash and pumpkins, tomatoes, green beans and sweetcorn

Africa – okra

Australia – you will need to use your imagination!

Wildlife plot, creating a plot planted up with pollinator friendly flowers amongst the vegetables, along with a home -made bird or bee box will help children to appreciate the importance of bio-diversity. Flowers suitable for allotments include poached egg plant, marigolds, honeywort, nasturtiums, French marigolds and allium.

Salad or stir fry plot, how about a plot designed to provide the ingredients for a specific dish? Salad crops such as radish, spring onions and lettuce are quick and simple to grow; strawberries taste good in salads too. The more adventurous or patient child may want to add broccoli, garlic and oriental vegetables such as pak-choi that can be added to the wok for a tasty stir-fry.

