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Gardening is a great way to connect with nature and it offers ample opportunities to support your child's development and skill building.

- It requires children to use their **thinking skills** to plan their task, follow the sequence of steps, remember information and make predictions about their plants. Children can be supported through the use of visual schedules, prompting or other ways familiar to them.
- When working in the garden, children may have to use their **whole body movement skills** to help them to balance, to move items around or to muster the strength to pull that stubborn weed from the ground.
- There are endless tasks that will challenge children's **fine motor skills** such as shovelling soil, planting seeds, or picking flowers. For some children, it is helpful to start by breaking these tasks down into small steps or use modelling or prompting to begin.
- Gardening is a feast for the **senses** - whether it's the texture of the soil, the splashing water, the scent and colour of the flowering plants, the singing of a bird or the rustle of the leaves-there is a fun sensory experience to be had. Be mindful of children with sensory processing difficulties. Some will have sensory needs around certain smells and textures.
- Gardening stirs **curiosity** within children, it promotes engagement and can encourage children to want to learn and discover more about their natural environment.

Whether you have access to a garden, a balcony or a window ledge, there are low cost gardening ideas that you can do with your child.

Planting: Planting and growing seeds can be done with very little resources and space. Choose seeds/plants that grow quickly and require low levels of care to help make your child's first gardening experience a success. Children can get involved in every step of the gardening process, including preparing the garden space. Be creative with your planting containers. Egg cartons, old plastic bottles, old toys or household items can make fun and interesting planters! Literacy skills can be part of gardening too (learning the

names of different plants, making a map of your garden or naming your plants (using lollipop sticks or recycled plastic). Planting bulbs or larger seeds such as peas or beetroot can help some children to engage more with the process.



Watering

Instead of using a traditional watering can, allow your child to experiment with alternative ways to water the plants.

- Make and decorate a watering can from a milk container.
- Use a small plastic cup - dip the cup into a bowl of water to fill it, then water the plants. This allows your child to have more control and a better understanding of what they are doing.
- **Experiment with containers** with different sized and types of openings. See which pours better, fills faster and empties faster (try a colander, something with a spray nozzle etc.). Incorporate maths and count how long each container takes. Children with more complex needs might find some containers easier to use than others.
- Another option is using a **squeeze bottle**. These are good for hand strength as the hands have to work hard to get the water out and they can also be more fun for target practice! Create your own **sprinkler**, pierce holes in the top of a plastic bottle, then have your child fill with water and squeeze. Bigger holes will make it simpler for children to squeeze if they have poor hand strength or smaller/less holes can be better for children who need more time to process information.



Other Nature Inspired Activities



- 🌸 Conduct a **wildlife inventory** or go on a **bug safari** (using a picture checklist) to discover what creatures live outside your door. Find a good look-out window and complete a **bird watch** from inside your home recording all the birds that visit your house. (Useful App:

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MERLIN BIRD ID). Follow up by researching ways to attract more wildlife to your garden (e.g. build a bug hotel).



The garden, filled with lots of colours, textures and natural objects, is a great place to **play**. Building a **fairy house** (or a home for other imaginary characters) is a fun way to encourage children to use their imagination and engage in pretend play. Including a child's special interest is a great gateway into imagination for children who might find it difficult to engage in pretend play.



Keep your hands busy and use your outdoor space as an **art studio**. Grab some paper and crayons and find something to draw. Your child can get really creative and use the materials from outdoors and some glue to create a picture. Some children might prefer to use their hands to create art and to explore textures from the garden.



Garden **sensory box** - children can create their own garden sensory box. Decorate a shoebox and fill it with the textures and colours you enjoy (twigs, rough rocks, crunchy leaves, soft pebbles), so on rainy days they can bring some garden indoors.

For information on planting seeds and other garden activities visit <https://kidsgardening.org/> and http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/gardening_with_children/