

*From *Sowing the Seeds of Wonder: Discovering the Garden in Early Childhood Education*. By Erika Perloff, Amy Carlson, Jill Begin. 2010.

Introduction

In a preschool play yard nearby, Isabel is turning over the soil with a small hand trowel while Dylan carefully rescues worms and places them out of the way. Jessie sprinkles birdseed on a patch of bare dirt and packs it down well, wondering what will grow from these mysterious seeds. Monica and Joaquin are playing intently under some bushes, with tiny people they have fashioned out of sticks and flowers. Today their teacher will help them harvest the sunflowers they grew, and show them how to eat the seeds and make the heads into natural bird feeders. Their chatter reflects the learning that is taking place. "I am going to grow corn so high, it will be up into the sky!" "Look, the water all went away into the dirt." "This plant is all dead. How come it died?" Without a lot of instruction, these children are exploring and discovering the natural world through a small patch of garden. They are making connections between the food they eat for lunch and the seeds they plant. They are taking care of a small piece of the planet and making it more beautiful.

The simple act of cultivating a garden can open up a world of growth, learning, and enjoyment. It also provides children with a delicious introduction to healthy eating. Children who garden love to "graze" on tomatoes, green beans, and carrots. Children are much more likely to eat vegetables when they have grown them themselves, and take great pride in contributing to the family table or the classroom salad.

A garden for young people rarely resembles a typical adult garden. It might appear as small plots of earth with plants crowded in every which way. Plastic dinosaurs may creep through lettuce forests, nibbling as they go. Seeds often sprout up from the pathways where they've been spilled, and sometimes the plants that grow from them are the best in the garden. Leaves become blankets for dolls, and flowers become pots for miniature tea parties set among the bushes. The garden is a place for young children to play, to dream,

to plant, to harvest and enjoy fresh produce, and to begin to know the workings of the natural world.¹

The Life Lab Approach to Garden-Based Learning

Life Lab is a nonprofit organization based in Santa Cruz, California. We have been bringing learning to life in gardens since the first Life Lab school garden was established in 1979. True to our roots, we continue to run year-round field trips and summer camps for kids of all ages at our Garden Classroom in Santa Cruz. We also support schools and organizations across the country as they endeavor to begin or enhance their own garden-based learning programs.

Our work is inspired by the hope that all children — whether from urban centers or rural communities — will have the opportunity to develop an intimate connection to the natural world and, specifically, to their own local environment. A preschool garden allows young children to watch a place change throughout the seasons, and even throughout the years. As students engage with this place, they develop a profound empathy and love for it, and a sense of belonging somewhere. As they watch a spider weave her web or warm up a worm bin with a blanket of fallen leaves, children take the initial steps across the divide that



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often separates people from place. As our students grow into decision-makers in their communities and beyond, their empathy and love for the natural world will serve as a foundation for a sense of responsibility and a determination to act on behalf of the environment.

Since the goal of an early childhood education garden is to create a space for joy, exploration, learning, and connection with living things, it is not necessary that you have a “green thumb” to get started. In fact, gophers, weeds, and other factors that might be devastating to a well-manicured botanical garden or a production farm can provide some of the most exciting learning opportunities in a children’s garden. In the garden, your job is not to know the name of every plant and keep everything in perfect order. Rather, it is to serve as a guide to the children, to help them get started, and to keep them safe. Remember that the act of mucking around with soil, seeds, fresh air, and growing things is just as important as the final harvest. Along the way, seedlings may be eaten by birds, stepped on by little feet, or overwatered and washed away. If you can help turn these events into moments of discovery and learning, and can help the child get started again, you will teach a life-long lesson on how we learn and grow from our experiences. One Life Lab teacher’s best garden experience began when she said, “That bird must have been really hungry to eat all our baby peas! What can we do next time to protect them?” and let the students work together to create a barrier to protect their new baby plants.



JOHN FISHER/LIFE LAB

Your students will have many questions once they begin their explorations. You do not need to have all the answers, just a willingness to discover along with them. Perhaps the best answer you can give to their gardening queries is “I don’t know, let’s find out together!”

Notes:

¹For a summary of research regarding the impact of garden-based learning on childrens’ academic achievement, nutrition, and social behaviors, visit: www.csgn.org/research.php