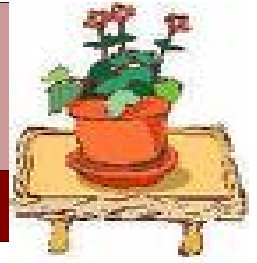


The Children's Corner



By Cathi Cote

Growing a Gardener

When approaching the topic of growing plants with children, most people immediately think about seeds and spring planting. There are, of course, other ways to get new plants started, and fall is a wonderful time to introduce children to some different means of plant propagation.

Planting fall bulbs with children gives them a window onto the specialized underground structures that some plants create. Bulbs also provide a lesson in patience while the seasons run their course. Look for "double" bulbs, where a newer and older bulb are still connected and use this as a means of illustrating how new bulbs develop. Keep in mind that children love having a garden space they can call their own. If possible, give them a designated area to plant their bulbs and provide them with a garden stake to mark the spot. Many garden centers provide plastic markers with pictures of the spring flowers that come from each type of bulb. Take two: one that can be placed in the ground and one that the child can clip to a conveniently located calendar to remind them about when and what to look for in the spring.

For more immediate gratification, why not help a child to bring the summer garden indoors for the winter? Many tender plants can easily be propagated by cuttings. Some examples of plants that grow well from cuttings are fibrous-rooted begonias, coleus, English ivy, geraniums, sedum, and most herbs. An alternative is to take cuttings from your favorite house plants. Jade plants, for example, are particularly easy to grow from cuttings. Watching a bare stem develop roots and begin to grow a whole new plant can seem truly miraculous to a child who may be experiencing the process for the first time. Some "rules of thumb" to remember when taking cuttings are:

- Always sterilize your cutting tools with rubbing alcohol or with a 50:50 solution of household bleach and water.
- Take cuttings from green growth and non-flowering stems before frost arrives and damages growing plant cells.
- Increase your odds of success by taking more cuttings than you think you need.
- Take approximately four to six inches of the stem for each cutting and remove all leaves except the top four, or so.

Immediately place your cuttings in water to prevent the stems from sealing over. (This rule does not apply to jade cuttings, which respond better if you allow them to air-dry for a day or two before trying to root them.)

Use a light, sterile rooting medium, ideally with a high proportion of perlite and peat

moss; do not use ordinary garden soil to root cuttings. The rooting process can be accelerated if you first dip the cut end of the stem into powdered rooting hormone. Keep the cuttings evenly moist and in bright, indirect light. A piece of plastic wrap placed over the entire planting tray will help to maintain some humidity and will prevent the cuttings from drying out. After a couple of weeks, test the cuttings by gently tugging on them. If you feel some resistance, it is a sign that roots are beginning to develop.

When you are sure that the new plants are healthy and well-rooted help your child transplant their indoor garden into individual pots. You can make the process even more fun by letting your child select his or her own clay or plastic pots to decorate. Provide them with water-based acrylic paints, and make sure that they only paint the outside of each pot. Give the painted pots time to dry thoroughly prior to setting plants in them.

Given adequate light and moisture, your child's indoor summer garden should grow and thrive throughout the winter months. After spring arrives and the threat of frost has passed help your child to move their plants back into the garden – perhaps into the same garden space where they planted their bulbs in the fall. This multi-season project is a great way to teach plant propagation as well as the seasonal cycles of growth and dormancy. In the process, you may be pleasantly surprised to find that you'll also be growing a gardener.