

By: [Mark Cullen](#) Green spaces, Published on Fri Jun 26 2015

While interviewing a young child on his obsession with being indoors, Richard Louv leaned in towards the young lad and asked, “What is it about being indoors that you find so appealing?”

“Why, that’s where the electrical outlets are,” he said.

That day, back in 2004, the author decided to write a book exploring the importance of nature in the lives of young people: *Last Child in the Woods*.

Although, it has been 10 years since Louv first published his landmark book, kids continue to suffer from “nature deficit disorder” and sequester themselves indoors. We are at risk of developing permanently hunched backs from looking down at our electronic hand held devices.

What can we do to reverse the trend of children wanting to be indoors? We can help them discover the wonders of the natural world by exposing them to fun and interesting components of it, beginning right in their own backyards.

Even for children living in highrise apartments, we can create opportunities for them to touch a worm, watch food grow and marvel at the miracle of a germinating seed.

Here are 10 fun, easy-to-do gardening projects for kids:

1. Monarch butterflies. Google them. Show your young charges some pictures and explain that this once-common species of butterfly has been in decline for some time. But more than that, the monarch is an important part of the cycle of life, as they act as primary pollinators for many plants that produce food for us. Over 30 per cent of our food is pollinated by members of the insect world, including honey bees.

Attracting monarchs is as easy as growing some milkweed in your yard. Seeds for milkweed are available at your local hardware store. Sow them in loose soil as soon as the frost is out of the ground, in a sunny position in the garden. The chrysalis of the monarch is beautiful; watching the adult emerge from its cocoon is magical.

2. Song birds. A garden does not exist in isolation of the wildlife around it. Take song birds. Plant some purple coneflower and watch the juncos and gold finch invade the loaded seed heads of the finished flowers.

Sunflowers are the low-hanging fruit of children’s projects, as the seed starts very quickly, usually within seven to 10 days. The large flowers are impressive and attract honey bees and bumble bees. Make sure that you sow sunflowers in the sun. Once the seed heads mature, song birds will feed on them for a couple of weeks.

3. Worms. Not every kid loves the feel of worms wriggling in their hands. But virtually all of them enjoy the magic of worms at work in a vermi-composter. Small, red wigglers are commonly used under the kitchen sink to consume raw organic waste material like banana and apple peels, lettuce and other green leftovers. You will need two plastic containers: one with drainage holes, which is used to hold the worms and compost and another to catch excess moisture.

Kits and red wigglers are available, complete with detailed instructions at www.cathyscomposters.com. Red wigglers generally cost about \$45 per pound and can be shipped through the mail.

4. Garden Bugs and (good) vermin. Your garden consists of much more than plants and soil. Bugs play a very important role in the cycle of life that is always churning out there in your yard. An insect hotel is an excellent and fun way to introduce youngsters to the wonders of biodiversity.

Consider building a mason bee house with your young charges. Drill 3/8" holes into wood that is at least 12 cm deep, making sure that there is no opening at one end of it. The female mason bee (which is common in every corner of the country) will lay her eggs in the round cavity of the wood. She will lay 2 or 3 female eggs and finish with a male. The male will hatch first and 'stand guard' over the nest while the females hatch and leave the nest.

5. Edible flowers. There are many flowering plants in the garden that are edible. It is important to teach children at a young age that they should not touch poisonous castor beans or the fruit of bittersweet vine (among others, http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/wp-content/uploads/RS_29-e.pdf). But, sow some nasturtium seeds in a sunny spot in your garden, and share it with your child. Every part of the plant is edible and has a peppery flavour. For sweet flavour, grow some salvia. Stevia is now a common herb that can be grown in containers. It is used as a calorie-free sugar substitute. You will be surprised at how sweet it really is.

6. Veggies. Children will enjoy growing — and eating — vegetables. The most tempting of all are carrots. Sow carrots in deep, open soil in a sunny position. Space seeds about 5 cm apart and rows 30 cm apart.

For fast results, sow radish seeds. Space the sowing by 10 days for a constant crop of fresh radishes over a long period of the summer. Sowing to harvest usually takes about 45 to 55 days. Veggies that germinate quickly and reliably include peas, beans, onion sets and leaf lettuce/mesclun mix.

7. Growing "off the ground." It's great fun for kids as it brings the plants closer to their eyes. You can move the containers into their living space, either on the deck or balcony. For reliable and exciting results, look for Sweet One Million cherry tomatoes. Sweet green peppers and 'patio' cucumbers also make for a great harvest, while growing in pots on a sunny deck or balcony. For fast and tasty results sow some mesclun mix, which includes leafy greens and lettuce. Your youngster will begin to harvest in less than 45 days.

8. Harvest rain. The collection of natural rain water is a great way to encourage a myriad of wildlife to your garden. Introduce kids to neighbourhood tadpoles, toads, frogs, dragonflies and other appealing amphibians and insects. A half barrel provides a great 'watering hole', as does a garden pond. There are ways to keep your pond algae free by adding oxygenating plants and fish. Rain barrels are a great way to hold natural rain water. I use mine to wash my hands outdoors before I go inside.

9. Peanuts. Ask anyone who has eaten freshly roasted, home grown peanuts and they will tell you there is nothing to compare the packaged commercial varieties to the real thing.

To grow peanuts, all you need is well drained soil, lots of sunshine and an early start to the season. It takes 120 days from sowing for peanuts to mature and most of us have that in a

south facing garden or against a south or west facing wall of the house. Peanuts are a 'root crop' and feature fabulous bright yellow flowers early in the summer.

10. Visit a park. Bypass the playground, and venture into a wooded area of your local public green spaces. Follow a trail and look for butterflies, hummingbirds, bumble bees and unusual flowers. Take your time. When you see a tree that has fallen over in the woods and beginning to rot, roll it over gently and look for ants: they represent the second stage of decomposition in the journey to becoming real soil.

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