

## Plant Magic and the Garden

By Linda Butler

There is something magical about taking a hard little seed, sticking it in dirt, pouring water on it, and seeing it grow into a large beautiful plant. Who can NOT be fascinated by the magic, growth, and change of seeds and plants?

Exploring the mysteries of plant life, growth, and care can be a wonderful experience for children. Most kids enjoy being “big” and working alongside their parents in the garden. Some families let a child choose a plant or an area that is “his/hers” and gives the child responsibility for that plant or area.



If you don't have room or ground for a garden, container gardening is a great option. Smaller plants, such as lettuce or radishes, can be grown successfully in flowerpots or the black gallon-size containers that many shrubs and larger nursery plants and flowers are grown in.

Part of gardening fun is discovering and appreciating new things about seeds and plants. Show your children the little seeds and a photo of the plant it will become. Talk about the size, color, and texture of seeds. “Green beans” actually start off as white seeds! Tomato seeds are so tiny! Sunflower seeds are tasty to eat as seeds, and will grow into very tall flowers. Spinach seeds are bumpy, but kale seeds are tiny and smooth. Pea seeds look like peas, only they're wrinkly. And carrot seeds are so small you can hardly see them at all!

NOW is the time to plant cold-tolerant vegetables such as radish, lettuce, spinach, broccoli, kale, peas, carrots and cabbage. These veggies can tolerate a bit of frost and grow best in cool weather. By mid-June spinach will bolt—grow seedy stalks—and become bitter and inedible.

Tender vegetables that cannot tolerate frost, such as beans, corn, and sunflowers, can be seeded directly into the ground around May 15—after danger of frost is passed. Other tender plants that need more time to mature, such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, tomatillos, can be planted indoors now and then transplanted to the garden on or around May 15.

Starting seeds indoors isn't difficult, but it can be tricky. They need to be kept warm until the seedlings emerge, then they need a lot of light. Direct sunlight can burn them; the best location will have dappled sunlight. Generally after about 3pm I put them into the sun as it's not as intense as earlier in the day. I put my trays of seedlings on a cookie sheet and take them out in the morning and, most importantly, bring them in at night.

Even without a garden, you can have fun with bean seeds. Many of the dried beans you cook will germinate and grow when kept moist. Bean races can be fun. Have each child plant 4-5 bean seeds into a jar that's been prepared with newspaper or a combination of newspaper and paper towel. (Paper towels alone can become too soggy for beans to grow well.) Sliding a knife between the paper and glass can help guide the seed into place. Pour in about 1/4c water into a pint size jar (1/2c for a quart—or until all the paper is moist and there's just a little water on the bottom.) Now, the race is on! Who has the first seed to germinate? (That means to put out a tiny root sprout.) Who has the first to have two little green leaves? Whose plant gets the tallest? Has the most leaves? If you'd like, have your children draw what their plant(s) look like each day. Practice measuring them and recording their height.



Some good books on gardening with kids are available at the library:

"Garden to table: a kid's guide to planting, growing, and preparing food" by Katherine Hengel.

Gardening projects for kids: 101 ways to get kids outside, dirty, and having fun" by Whitney Cohen "A Backyard Vegetable Garden for Kids" by Amie Jane Leavitt, "Garden crafts for kids: 50 great reasons to get your hands dirty" by Diane Rhoades, "The Great Seed Mystery for Kids" by Peggy Henry

## Garden and plant trivia

Corn, beans, and (hard skinned) winter squash are considered to be “the three sisters” to many Native American tribes. These three crops, along with meat caught by the hunters, were the mainstay of their diets. Most legends regarding the sisters were women who were different, but learned to use their differences in getting along, to the benefit of themselves and their people. Corn, beans, and squash grow differently (some tall, some spreading on the ground) and have different tastes and textures, but all together they are nourishing and strengthening. Like the three sisters, we are all different, yet together we help our family grow.

Carrots came from Afghanistan and then were introduced to Europe then America. Though most carrots are orange, there are also yellow, pink, and purple carrots.

Celery originated in marshland in the Mediterranean area. The Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans grew celery as a medicinal plant. The Romans ate celery to cure stomach problems and encourage a good night’s sleep. Bedtime celery snack, anyone?

Spinach is thought to have originated in ancient Persia (now Iran.) The Persians grew spinach as greenery for their prized long-haired cats. (Perhaps you can get your kids to eat spinach by feeding it to them as if they were cats!) By 150 BC spinach was growing in China near the many rice paddies. The Moors brought spinach to Spain, and it became common in Europe in the 1500s. Spinach wasn’t originally popular in America, but its demand grew quickly because of the comic strip character, Popeye, in the 1930s.

Tomatoes or *tomatl* grew wild in the Andes Mountains of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador. They were cultivated by the Aztecs and Incas as early as 700AD and discovered by Hernando Cortes and his Spanish explorers in 1519, when they were taken back to Spain. Tomatoes spread through Europe. In France they were known as the “pomme d’amour” or love apple. Early American settlers didn’t love tomatoes, though. They believed that the tomato plant was poisonous. Now tomatoes are grown and eaten throughout the United States. The largest tomato on record was weighed in at 7 lb 12 oz—similar in weight to many newborn babies!

Pumpkins are related to the squash that ancient Native Americans grew. Columbus carried pumpkin seeds with him back to Europe. Europeans weren’t so crazy about pumpkins, but they considered them good for pig food. However it’s in Belgium, rather than the US that the Guinness World Heaviest pumpkin was raised. It weighed over 2,624 pounds, more than a small car!

### Gardening Information:

Here’s a link to suggested planting times in the Salt Lake City area. These dates are good guidelines. I’ve noticed that we in Utah County can be about a week behind Salt Lake City in growing and blossoming times.

<https://garden.org/apps/calendar/?q=Salt+Lake+City%2C+Utah>

The Utah State University Extension is an excellent resource for both planting and preserving of vegetables. This link will take you to their homepage. By clicking on “Research” you can find access to all their information on Gardening, Agriculture, Food and Health, and a variety of other useful resources.

<https://extension.usu.edu/index>