

Practice Fine Motor Skills in the Garden

Overview: Discover how to use common gardening activities to help young gardeners strengthen their fine motor skills.

Materials:

- Appropriately sized-seeds or seedlings for transplanting
- Trowels
- Watering can or sprayer
- Potting soil (optional)
- Seed-starting trays or pots (optional)

Approximate Time to Complete: 30 minutes

Location: Indoor or outdoor

Ages: Pre-K, Kindergarten, 1, 2, 3

Season: All seasons

Instructions:

Gardening is a fun way for kids to practice fine motor skills. Doing tasks that require small movements and coordination of the hands, fingers, and wrists exercise the small muscles and joints and help them learn to work together to complete a task. Below you will find some examples of common gardening activities that encourage fine motor skill development. When gardening with kids, it's important to model the tasks at hand. Do each activity together and be sure to give them constructive feedback so that they can learn by doing and create positive associations with their time in the garden.



Planting seeds

1. Start with large seeds, such as beans, peas, and sunflowers so young kids can easily pick them up one at a time. As kids gain confidence, they can progress to smaller seeds, such as beets and nasturtiums. Tomatoes and peppers are some of the smaller seeds that can easily be planted one at a time. (Tiny seeds, like lettuce and basil, are usually planted a pinchful at a time or sprinkled over the soil surface.)
2. Consult seed packets to determine the proper spacing between plants and calculate how many seeds you'll need for your planting area. Also consult the seed packet for how deeply to plant the seeds.
3. Mark out your planting area with string or by laying sticks on the ground.
4. Kids can use their fingers to make small holes in the soil. To estimate the distance between each hole, a hand "shaka" (this is the length from the tips of pinkie to thumb when a hand is stretched wide) or the length of a trowel's blade can be used as examples to model creative ways to measure.
5. Do a similar activity to indicate proper planting depth. For example, a half-inch might equal the length from the tip of the index finger to the first knuckle.
6. When all of the holes are made, rather than trying to reach into a seed packet, pour the seeds into a small cup so that kids can easily pick up individual seeds. If you are planting multiple kinds of seeds, an empty egg carton or ice cube tray can also be a handy way to keep seeds separate.
7. Encourage kids to be intentional about how many seeds they are planting in each hole. For most seeds, plant two per hole to ensure that at least one will grow.
8. As an additional reminder of what areas are planted, wait to cover the holes with soil until all seeds have been planted. That way, you can see that each hole has been planted.

Note: If you are not ready to plant in-ground, need an indoor activity, and/or have a large group of students to work with, this activity can be adapted by using seed-starting trays. Check out our ideas for using [repurposed egg cartons](#) to sort seeds, plant, and play a fun Mancala game. Once the seedlings sprout, you can follow the directions below.

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Transplanting

1. Working with seedlings also provides lots of opportunities for practicing fine motor skill development. Removing a seedling from its pot or tray, requires kids to be gentle with delicate transplants so as to not damage the roots or plant. In many cases, the root ball will need to be gently pushed out through the bottom and may even require the help of a tool. When working with young gardeners, if the root ball is stuck, try scooting it out with a spoon. Sometimes you can loosen stubborn root balls by rolling or massaging the container garden to loosen the roots.
2. Have kids gently hold the rootball in the cup of their hand, or for very sturdy plants, by the leaves. Never hold a seedling by its stem — if the stem breaks, the seedling dies. (Leaves and roots, on the other hand, will usually regrow.)
3. If the soil in your garden is nice and loose (and hopefully it is, because that's what plants like!) then kids can dig holes by hand or with a trowel.

Note: Trowels are great tools for digging holes for larger transplants, adding compost to soil, or placing mulch around a plant's base. If kids will be digging holes, remind them to make a neat pile of soil right next to the hole so that they can use it to backfill around the plant afterwards. If they are transferring matter such as compost or fertilizer from one place to another, encourage them to hold the trowels steady and make sure the valuable nutrients can make it to the plant! You can even make it a game to try not to spill any.

4. Follow the same spacing guidelines as when you're planting seeds. Making and spacing all the holes before planting is a good idea.
5. Always plant seedlings at the same depth as they were in their pot — in other words, don't plant any of the stem. (The only common exception is tomatoes, which can be planted deeper.)

Watering

An activity most young gardeners love, watering is another great way to develop fine motor skills.

1. The first step is to select a watering vessel. Kids can use a prefabricated watering can or make their own from repurposed containers of all sizes and shapes, such as empty water bottles or milk jugs. Spray bottles can also work well and their gentle drops can keep seeds from moving from their planted location. Make sure to use an appropriately sized vessel for your child's ability level.
2. Next, let them fill their chosen watering tool. You can use a faucet, hose, or even have a bucket of water to fill the container. Having a watering can or sprayer for each child working in the garden will help keep down waiting time while filling them up at the hose and therefore keep kids focused on the activity. Teach them how to avoid overfilling the can to conserve water.
3. Let the watering begin! Teach your young gardeners that it is the plant roots that absorb the water. Have them strive to provide the water where it is needed by encouraging them to practice applying water at the base of the plant.
4. Finally, teaching them how to determine the proper moisture of soil through touch is another important lesson. Have kids insert a finger one or two inches (can be measured by knuckles) into the soil to make sure the water is not just at the top, but is also reaching down to the roots. Most plants prefer moist soil that is not too wet or too dry.