

A Garden for Growing Children

Hally Baker plants seeds of knowledge at her Elk Grove day-care center

Ask Hally Baker how young children learn important life lessons, and she'll point you to her garden.

Well, it's not really Baker's garden, at least not entirely. It also belongs to the half-dozen youngsters in her day-care center, Butterfly Garden Preschool and Child Care, where fresh fruits and vegetables and plenty of outside time playing and tending the garden are on the menu.

Baker believes many life lessons and a host of good habits can be learned in the garden. In fact, she says, almost everything a kid needs to know can be learned from tending and enjoying the garden.

"Children learn through play. They can learn math skills by measuring how tall vegetables grow. They can chart a tomato plant's size from tiny seedling to mature plant. We can compare the size month-to-month. They can learn counting and sorting by harvesting vegetables. They can learn how things feel, smell.

"We don't do a lot of dittoes here. I call (those types of things) parent pleasers that don't necessarily teach kids all the skills they need."

Twenty-one half-barrels line the Elk Grove backyard garden, all of them nestled alongside or against fruit trees, herb gardens, butterfly gardens, green bean teepees and more. The barrels overflow with vegetables, herbs and flowers.

Zucchini plants hang their large, scratchy leaves over the sides. Long, green zucchinis hide inside the foliage. Shiny purple eggplants hang like bright baubles from beneath light green leaves infused with a hint of purple.

Pole beans snake themselves up bamboo poles higher and higher, and make a shady retreat just the right size for preschoolers. Peaches hang precariously on a nearby tree, and beg to be picked and eaten on the spot.

"A lot of parents today are fast-food happy. Instead, we go into the garden to pick our lunch," Baker says. Along the way, the kids learn colors and how to count.

They learn about aphids, tomato hornworms and more. They learn how to spot a praying mantis. They learn that ladybugs, earthworms and bees are good for the garden. They learn how food gets to the grocery store, as well as how and when to pick

it and how to prepare it. They learn that an apple tastes great in the garden.

And without realizing it, they learn about healthy eating and how to work together.

They discuss shapes of vegetables and fruit. They learn to add and subtract as they harvest. They learn responsibility: The kids have pint-size watering cans to water their gardens and care for tiny seedlings.

"We know developing healthy eating habits starts when you're little," Baker explains, her voice full of enthusiasm. "Things children learn the first five years affects them for the rest of their lives."

Ask Baker's 6-year-old son Ethan about his favorite vegetable, and without hesitating, he replies, "Eggplant." He prefers to pick it himself, he says, and likes it peeled, sliced and cooked the way his mom prepares it.

Baker traces her love of gardening to helping in her parents' large garden. She and her sister used to get up early Saturday

mornings, she remembers, and pick produce to sell to the neighbors.

"I remember the smiles on people's faces. I remember the joy of sharing our vegetables with less fortunate neighbors. I really thank my parents for teaching me about gardening, and hope I can help other child-care providers as well as parents learn about and love gardening."

This article originally appeared in the October 11, 2008 edition of The Sacramento Bee and is reprinted with permission. Written by Pat Rubin.

