



MEALTIME MEMO

JULY
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GARDENING WITH CHILDREN



Introducing children to gardening can be an enriching experience that fosters a love for nature and promotes an acceptance of healthy foods. By including gardening activities in your child care program, you can create a hands-on learning environment for children to witness the magic of seed to harvest. This *Mealtime Memo* discusses how to engage children in gardening activities to increase their knowledge and acceptance of healthy, local foods.

Garden Options

Multiple types of gardens may work in your program. Choose the option(s) that best fits your climate, space, and expertise. Below are definitions of three types of gardens.

- **In-Ground:** a traditional method of growing plants directly in the soil, typically outdoors.
- **Raised Bed:** an elevated box that is relatively small and filled with enough soil to support plants without using the soil underneath the box.
- **Container:** growing plants in containers (e.g., pots, planters, baskets, boxes, barrels) rather than in the ground. They can be grown in limited spaces and various locations (e.g., patios, balconies, windowsills).



If you are unsure where to begin and which type of garden will work in your program, start small with a container garden. Plants grown in containers are easy to maintain, have fewer weeds, are mobile, and are easy to harvest.

Gardening Resources

- For a quick start guide, refer to the ICN Grab in 5 Lesson: [5 Ways to Start a Garden](#).
- Check out the ICN resource, [Planting and Harvesting Food Safety Tips](#).
- Refer to the resource, [Safety in the Little Gardeners' Garden](#) from the University of Wisconsin-Extension for information on how to build a garden space safely.



Garden Costs

To help with costs, you may use CACFP funds to pay for gardening supplies such as seeds, fertilizer, watering cans, plot rental, gardening tools, rakes, and other items as long as the produce grown is used as part of the CACFP meal or for nutrition education activities.



Benefits of Gardening

Gardening can be a great learning opportunity for children and adults! Planting a garden allows children to witness how food grows and where it originates. It is fun to see how planted seeds grow into fruits and vegetables. Children learn to make the connection between the foods they see in the grocery store or on their plates and what is in a garden.

Growing your own food provides opportunities to teach lessons about agriculture and nutrition. It also has many other benefits:

- Enhances access to fresh fruits and vegetables
- Encourages children to eat the fruits and vegetables they've grown
- Leads to cost savings from eating homegrown produce
- Increases time spent outdoors and in nature
- Promotes physical activity through gardening tasks like watering plants, weeding, and digging
- Boosts self-confidence through the process of growing and caring for food



Gardening Activities

Helping children discover where food comes from—how it looks, tastes, feels, sounds, smells, and even changes—opens their minds to various food choices. Incorporating food and food-related activities into nutrition education in the garden and classroom helps children develop a positive relationship with food and nutrition.

In the Garden

Let children take ownership of the garden. Give them tasks so they feel connected and take pride in their work.

- **Physical Activity:** Gardening is a great way to get exercise and allows children to sharpen gross and fine motor skills.
 - Gross motor (large muscle) skills: pushing a wheelbarrow, digging, bending down to weed or pick plants, watering plants, raking soil, and moving plant containers.
 - Fine motor (small muscle) skills: planting seeds, picking up worms, pulling weeds, and plucking ripe produce.
- **Exploring in the Garden:** Give children the opportunity to explore the wonders of the garden. They can search for worms, insects, and weeds. They can also inspect the parts of the vegetable, like the stem, root, and flower, as well as the color, texture, shape, smell, and size.
- **Sensory Exploration:** Encourage children to use all senses in the garden, touch and feel leaves, smell the produce, listen to nature, taste the harvested and washed produce, and note the various colors.



In the Classroom

Engage children in classroom learning about gardening to help increase their interest in healthy foods.

- **Taste Testing:** Encourage children to taste the “fruits” of their labor and come up with sensory words to describe them. Have children rate the garden harvest based on visual appeal, smell, taste, and texture. To rate foods, use the USDA resource, [Try-Day Taste-Testing Ballot](#).
- **Arts and Crafts:** While discussing the garden delights, ask children to show their creativity through different art projects. Color or paint pictures of fruits and vegetables in the garden or glue parts of the vegetables (leaves, stems, flowers) onto cardboard.
- **Reading:** Read garden-themed books or story books about fruits and vegetables. Here are some ideas:
 - *Eating the Alphabet* by Lois Ehlert
 - *Growing Vegetable Soup* by Lois Ehlert
 - *Rainbow Stew* by Cathryn Falwell
 - *Tops and Bottoms* by Janet Stevens
 - *The Tiny Seed* by Eric Carle



Grow It, Try It, Like It! is a garden-themed nutrition education kit with Farm to Early Care and Education lessons and hands-on nutrition education activities for [child care centers](#) and [family child care homes](#).

Classroom Discussion Prompts

Spark positive conversations with children about gardening with these questions.

- What are some things that grow in a garden?
- Has anyone heard of or seen a greenhouse?
- What do plants need to grow?

Menu Ideas

The following menu ideas provide a variety of fruits and vegetables that can be grown in your garden. One recipe contains multiple meal components listed in parentheses after the recipe.

Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
Cottage Cheese Cherry Tomatoes 1% Milk	Harvest Stew (Meat Alternate, Vegetable) Whole Wheat Rolls Roasted Beets 1% Milk	Rhubarb Muffins Radishes Water

Recipes



- The [Child Nutrition Recipe Box](#) has USDA-standardized recipes for child care centers and family child care homes.
- The [Child Nutrition Recipe Box: New CACFP Lunch/Supper Recipes](#) has standardized recipes per age group (3–5 and 6–18 year-olds) and for 6, 25, and 50 servings.

References

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