



Rock Garden!



| BY SHARON KATZ COOPER |

April showers may bring May flowers, but the slightly warmer air brings an urge to get outside once again! Creating a rock garden is a simple, fun activity that can involve kids of all ages. It's a great way to get outside, learn about collecting, and discover a little about how nature works.

Collecting rocks can create adventure for young children. Ask them to try to find rocks of different colors, shapes, and sizes. Encourage them to think of places where they might find interesting rocks. Is there a stream near your house? A park? A playground with a gravel area? These are all places where interesting rocks may be found.

Creating collections is a great way for children to begin thinking about comparisons and contrasts. They can gather rocks that look alike, and those that are quite different. They can also experiment with texture and shape. Ask your child what a particular rock feels like. Encourage her to describe it with questions like - What do you feel? Is it smooth or rough? Round or with sharp edges? Is this rock the same on all sides?

Collecting also gives children a sense of ownership and pride. Collecting rocks for a garden gives children a chance to gather items that they chose themselves, and that represent colors, shapes or other characteristics that they personally like. Rocks are abundant and varied in most areas, can be small, and are usually free in nature, making them excellent objects for a child's collection.

Starting a child on the path to gardening is also a wonderful introduction to the way nature works. Watching seeds grow from tiny pods into real, live plants provides an opportunity to build appreciation for what plants need from nature (sunlight, water, soil, nutrients), and can lead to interesting discussions about the world around you.

Here's What You Need...

8-10 small to medium sized rocks, depending on the space you have available

Several seeds or small plants

Some potting soil

A good spot for a garden in a yard, or a ceramic planter for use on a balcony or even indoors

Directions...

Grab a few moments, a paper bag or box for collecting, and don't be afraid to get a little dirty!

1. Have your child arrange his or her rocks in a circle in a spot in your yard (or balcony) that gets at least partial sunshine. If you don't have a yard, you can build your rock garden in a large ceramic platter, or even use a large, but sturdy paper plate for a small one. The circle of rocks should be large enough to leave an open space for soil in the middle.

2. Help your child place the rocks close together, so they will hold the soil between them.

3. Scoop out some potting soil and help your child fill the circle in the middle of the rock circle with the soil. Cover the rocks up at least halfway, so they'll stay in place and look like a part of the garden. Pat the soil down gently.

4. Plant seeds or small seedlings in your soil. Help your child to water his garden enough to get the soil damp.

5. Water the soil at least a couple of times per week and watch how it grows!

Creating collections helps to develop cognitive skills by stimulating awareness,

This Helps Develop...

observation, and reasoning. Comparing and contrasting items encourages the development of skills that will be useful for science, art, and mathematics.

This activity also develops fine motor skills – the use of small muscle movements in the hands that occur in coordination with the eyes. Fine motor skills are built when parents encourage children to pick up rocks with their hands, examine them carefully and place them into a pattern. Selecting and planting seeds, patting down soil, and watering also develop fine motor skills.

Social emotional development involves a child's feelings of self worth, confidence, and pride as well as their ability to get along with others in a group setting. Children love to create something that belongs to them and enjoy sharing it with others. As your garden grows, your child will develop a sense of achievement. Encouraging your child to describe what he or she finds and collects, why she chooses each particular rock, and how she takes care of the garden will also enhance your child's communication skills.

This monthly family activity series, "Hands-on Kids!" is brought to you by a partnership between the Children's Museum of Northern Virginia (CMNOVA) and FAMILIES Magazine. For more activities you can do with your children to spark their love of learning, visit the CMNOVA web site at www.cmnova.org. CMNOVA is committed to building a place where our children can freely explore and develop a lifelong love of learning. Sharon Katz Cooper is

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