Cold weather is here: time to start an organic produce garden with your kids



We welcome pediatrician Dr. Marion Mass to talk about starting a garden from a piece of suburban lawn. – Drs. Kardos and Lai

A few years back, my family was getting ready for my parents to come for dinner and I was peeling the skins off the roasted beets we had grown for my mother. One of her favorites…but not mine. My five-year-old Brian had picked the beets and was eager to try them. As Brian brought a sliver of beet up to his mouth I braced myself for a " yucky face". Instead, I was shocked to see him gobble the beets up. He loved them. To this day, beets are one of his favorite veggies.

Hands down, the best activity I have ever done with my family

is planting and nurturing an organic garden for 11 years. Along the path to growing delectable vegetables, we have discovered together gardening's health, intellectual and social benefits.

Actively tied to the process of supplying their own food, gardening kids will naturally want to eat more and more produce. Kids develop a sense of pride (truly, a basketful of beans, lettuce and cucumbers is so attractive) and eventually they develop a positive association with the outdoors and vegetables. In addition to eating more quantity, what your kids eat will be healthier than store bought veggies. Produce closer to harvest contains more nutrients and you don't get closer than your own yard to table. If you garden organically, you will also avoid potentially harmful chemicals. Lastly, there is a sense of relaxation upon stepping into a garden. It is a balm for anxiety, for depression, for anger; in short, one of the best adjuvants to mental health therapy that I know.

If you want to harvest a crop next year, and you live in a cold weather area of the northern hemisphere, NOW is the best time to start. The most cumbersome task of starting a garden is to dig up the sod (existing lawn), but a few tricks in the fall can prevent this disc-slipping chore.

- Chose a spot in your yard that gets at least 6 and preferably 8 hours of sunlight a day.
- If possible, stay away from edges, tree lines and spots where large garden parasites (such as deer, rabbit and groundhogs) lurk.
- If you live next to a pesticide happy neighbor, you will want to locate your garden away from a spray zone and will want to think about runoff. A helpful site to determine runoff capabilities of specific pesticides is: http://www.pw.ucr.edu/
- Remember you may need to water your organic garden bed once in awhile, so keep it close to a water source (or

at least someplace to which you don’t mind lugging a hose).

- Start small: a 3 x 10 foot plot can grow a good bit if you plan well. Lay out a 12 layer thick plot of newspaper over the grass where you want your garden to grow and dump 4 inches of composted manure, manure and hummus mix or mushroom soil over top of the newspaper. You can purchase in bulk from a garden center (I would do 2 cubic yards for a 3 x 10 spot) or in bags (about 15 40 lb bags).

That’s it. Now go away and leave the garden alone until spring. During the fall and winter, the grass will die and the newspaper will rot. Both will become a source of composted nutrients for your garden veggies. While you hibernate this winter, start your wheels turning and think about what crops you will grow. Buy a few packs of discounted seeds now; they will still germinate next year.

When the ground is ready in the spring, rent a tiller or get a sturdy pitchfork (trust me, the tiller is SO much easier!!) and turn over the soil mixing the composted manure, rotted newspaper and dead sod into the rocky soil we have around here. The result will be a much richer garden soil that your vegetables will love.

What are you waiting for?? Get cracking now and start your produce garden. Hopefully, by next spring your kids will be eating and enjoying organic beets that they grew !!!!

Marion Mass MD, FAAP

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In practice for 17 years, Marion Mass MD, FAAP graduated from Penn State and Duke University Medical School. She completed her pediatric residency at Northwestern University's Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Currently Dr. Mass works at Jellinek Pediatrics in Doylestown, PA and serves on the Wellness Council of the Central Bucks School District, PA. Produce from her kids' garden garnishes the plates of many local families as well as the plates of the restaurant Puck. All garden profits benefit Relay for Life. When she is not in her home garden, you can find her also tending to her son's middle school garden.