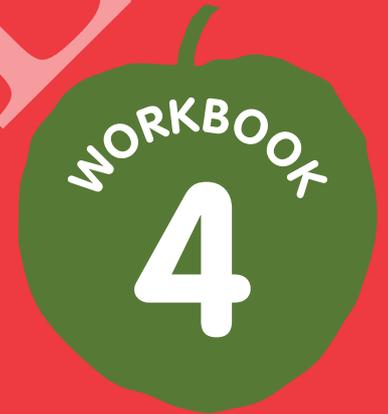


KITCHEN GARDEN PROGRAM for EARLY CHILDHOOD



Kitchen and
garden experiences
and embedded
practice



Experiences in the garden and kitchen spaces

When children are encouraged to participate in regular hands-on, sensory cooking and gardening experiences in early childhood, we are paving the way for each child to develop positive food habits for life. Within these experiences the children are given the opportunity to practise their fine motor skills, build resilience and nurture a sense of curiosity.

In early childhood settings, the garden and kitchen experiences can provide numerous learning opportunities: children can develop essential skills in literacy and numeracy, and gain knowledge about science, sustainability, geography, other cultures and more.

The kitchen and garden spaces are ideal for supporting a curriculum that balances free play with intentional teaching. In the [Early Years Learning Framework](https://bit.ly/EYlearningframework) (bit.ly/EYlearningframework), play-based learning is described as 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations'. The Kitchen Garden Program allows and encourages this active learning.



NORTH FITZROY CHILDCARE CO-OP

The team at North Fitzroy Childcare Co-op (also simply called Co-op), in Victoria, promotes environmentally sustainable values and practices by connecting children with the natural world through a weekly nature play program and regular cooking and gardening experiences.

At Co-op, children access the garden space daily, rain or shine. Often, they help the educators tend to the veggie patches through watering, digging, mulching and planting. The children also enjoy cooking at least once a month and use the produce they harvest from the garden whenever available. During these cooking experiences they learn to chop, roll, tear, cut, beat, mix and knead. Recently the children have made spring rolls, pasta, salads, damper, bread, sushi and dumplings, among other dishes.

Mel Ralescu, an educator at Co-op, created a birthday planting calendar to provide a meaningful and relevant context for learning how to grow and cook food. The educators encouraged children to choose a vegetable, herb or fruit that grows during the month of their birthday and plant it in the garden. The children became responsible for caring for their plant over the course of the year and chose dishes to cook with their harvest.

By the end of the year, the children's willingness to try new foods increased and they could confidently care for their plants. Through trial and error, the children and educators learnt valuable lessons about how a shady backyard can affect growth over winter.

In the first year of the project, Co-op was not always able to harvest enough produce for cooking and instead relied heavily on store-bought produce. The goal for the second year is to ensure that more harvested produce is incorporated into the dishes they cook through better planning.



Download the [Birthday planting calendar](#) activity from the Shared Table, inspired by North Fitzroy Childcare Co-op.

Integrating garden and cooking experiences into your play-based learning program

Observe what the children are interested in and build on this through planned and spontaneous experiences. For example, you may notice that a group of children are rolling small balls of playdough and grouping them together while making chirping noises. By observing their play and interactions, you discover that the children are pretending to be baby birds while making bird's nests filled with eggs. This may prompt you to search for birds' nests together in the outdoor yard while discussing the types of animals that lay eggs, or you may decide to plan a cooking experience using eggs from a neighbour's chickens.



CLARENDON CHILDREN'S CENTRE

At Clarendon Children's Centre in South Melbourne, staff believe that children's learning is deepened and extended when they are actively engaged in and can make decisions about their play. The educators design the curriculum in partnership with the children at the centre. They do this through a process of observing, interacting with, and listening to the children, and incorporating their ideas and interests into the program.

For example, on one occasion the staff observed three children in the kinder room playing 'cafe'. Each child had chosen a specific role to enact during this dramatic play experience. Afterwards, the educators asked the children if they would like to create a 'real' cafe at the centre and invite the special people in their lives to eat there.

The kinder children were overjoyed by the idea of creating their very own food establishment, which they proudly named the Magic Café. The educators guided the children through this project over the course of six weeks.

The children became involved in all aspects of planning and execution, from writing their own menus, discussing nutrition and dietary needs, devising 'to do' lists, sourcing ingredients from South Melbourne Market and local supermarkets, and preparing the dishes.

On the day, the children decorated the room and tables and served and entertained their guests. Through this process the children explored numeracy, literacy, and science concepts, and developed teamwork, communication and social skills.



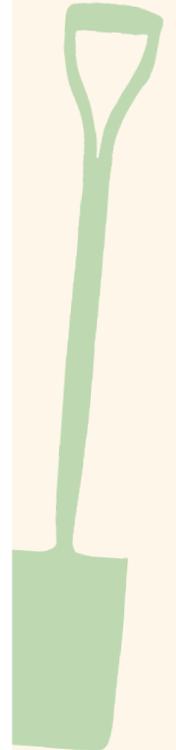
Embrace all opportunities for learning

Consider how you structure the day to encourage participation in your program, including arrivals, settling, eating, resting, toileting, transitions, active and quiet time, and group and solitary play. To start with, help children to settle quickly at drop off by giving them important tasks such as cutting fruit for morning tea, watering the garden or feeding the chickens.



NORTH FITZROY CHILDCARE CO-OP

At North Fitzroy Childcare Co-op, educators involve the children in every aspect of the lunchtime routine. This empowers the children to feel a sense of belonging and promotes their independence and autonomy. Children clean the tables, organise the crockery and cutlery, prepare face washers and set the plates and glasses around the table. They fill jugs with water and pour it into their glasses. They serve themselves and help their friends, then work together to clean up. Through this experience the children develop understandings in numeracy as they count the number of children enrolled, match place settings and chairs, set out an appropriate number of bowls and cutlery for each setting, and explore concepts such as fractions and dividing food evenly among the group.



Garden activities for children

When first starting to garden with young children, begin with the basics, and then build up their skills over time. Start with short, simple tasks that don't require technical skills or special equipment such as watering, mulching, and searching for snails.

Children respond well to repeating the same tasks, as this allows them to consolidate knowledge and master skills over time. When they become confident after practising the same gardening tasks multiple times, they can teach these skills to other children and eventually transfer their knowledge on to new, more complicated or time-consuming jobs.

Some gardening tasks that children could do:

- designing the garden space – children could build a diorama of their dream garden space or sketch a garden plan
- assessing the garden site – children could help you check the wind direction, soil quality and the sun's movement around the garden
- observing the animals that inhabit the garden
- identifying pests and beneficial insects
- planting seeds
- transplanting seedlings
- digging in soil and compost
- helping to build garden beds
- measuring plants as they grow
- companion planting, in which the children research which plants grow well together and help you position plants in the garden
- mulching garden beds
- watering plants
- weeding
- making natural pesticides and spraying plants
- saving seeds for the next year
- creating shade and climbing structures
- decorating the garden space
- making signs for the garden space
- measuring rainfall
- building a compost, worm farm or worm cafe
- ripping cardboard, adding food scraps or collecting dead leaves for the compost, worm farm or worm cafe
- creating flower arrangements for the table
- cleaning tools and storing them properly
- observing weather patterns and noticing seasonal changes
- making a scarecrow
- making a bird scarer
- making newspaper planting pots.



Download a [Planting and harvesting guide](#) from the Shared Table to help you plan tasks with the children at your service.

