

Waterwise Kids Article

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Digging in the Dirt: Fun Ways to Share Waterwise Gardening With Kids This Summer

Kids love getting dirty! Playing, digging, moving and piling—dirt is just one of many reasons that gardening is a fun, family-friendly outdoor activity.

This summer, the [Regional Water Providers Consortium](#) (RWPC) encourages you to hand your kids a bucket and shovel and turn gardening into a learning experience.

We work hard to teach children the value of using resources wisely, and understanding water conservation is especially important in the Portland metro area. While we receive about 37 inches of rainfall annually, we get only about 12 percent of that precipitation June through September. We tend to use the highest amount of water during summer months when our water supply is at its lowest—most people are surprised to learn that water use can often double in our region during the summer months due to outdoor watering.

Living in rainy Oregon can make it tough for kids to connect the dots about saving water. Here are three activities that promote water conservation and produce tangible results.

1. **Introduce your kids to the joy of gardening using native plants.** Children love gardening—helping your little ones plant a seed, care for it and watch it grow and bloom into a beautiful flower is a great way to introduce an understanding of the value of natural resources. Choosing native plants for children's early gardening experiences is a great way to set them (and the environment) up for success: once established, native plants are very low maintenance, require little to no pesticides or fertilizers, and survive on minimal water.

Activity: Start seedlings indoors using planting soil and an egg carton for a container (make sure to poke holes in the bottom for drainage). After seeds have sprouted into seedlings—and after the danger of frost has passed—transplant to the garden. Work together to identify a part of the yard with ideal conditions for the plant(s) you've selected, and group with others that have similar needs, including water, sun and shade. Penstemon is a great choice for a native plant that is easy to grow from seed, with the added bonus that its brightly colored flowers attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

2. **Give your soil a healthy boost with compost.** Adding organic matter such as mulch or compost can greatly increase your soil's ability to absorb and store water (especially important in our region, where the native soil is dominated by clay). Plus, it's a great excuse for kids to dig!

Activity: Next time you are at your local garden center, pick up some compost or mulch to add to your garden beds. Work together to spread the compost or mulch around your plants—2 to 3 inches thick is best. You can also compost vegetable scraps and other plant debris such as plant clippings or fall leaves to make your own compost at home.

3. **Use a watering gauge to make sure you water your garden efficiently.** A watering gauge helps you see how long it takes your sprinkler to water an inch—about what grass needs

each week. Once you know this, you can adjust your watering to meet your garden's needs so that it gets just the right amount of water each week.

Activity: Request a free watering gauge kit from RWPC, and follow the instructions together. The kits are available from July 7-31 for anyone who lives in the RWPC [service territory](#) (while supplies last; one per customer). Request your free watering gauge kit by calling 503.823.7528, emailing RWPCinfo@portlandoregon.gov or visiting RWPC's [Facebook page](#). Please include your mailing address, water provider name and how you heard about the offer.

Looking for other fun activities that help kids understand water conservation? Visit RWPC's Kid's Corner at www.conserveh2o.com/kids.

Finally, here are some additional resources offered by RWPC to help you create a waterwise garden that will be enjoyed by kids and adults alike:

- [Water-Efficient Plants for the Willamette Valley](#): an online guide packed with photos and information about waterwise plants
- [Planting & Maintaining Your Lawn](#): a brochure to help you get the most out of your lawn, with information on grass alternatives and waterwise maintenance
- [The Weekly Watering Number](#): the amount of water in inches that your lawn needs each week, tailored to your zip code

Happy gardening!

About the Regional Water Providers Consortium:

The Regional Water Providers Consortium (a group of 20+ local water providers plus the regional government Metro) is committed to good stewardship of our region's water through conservation, emergency preparedness planning, and water supply coordination. The Consortium provides resources and information to help individual and commercial customers save water.