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More than a Tomato Plant

Engaging the “Players” You’ll Find in Early Childhood Gardens

by Clare Nugent and Sandra Duncan

A garden can teach a child many things—the value of work, the virtue of patience, the gift of gentleness, and the knowledge of nature. But a deeper question to ponder is: what can a child teach ME, in a garden?

When Ferntop Nature Preschool first opened, gardening with the children was at the top of my list. Planning, preparing, and planting were the main tasks I had in mind for the children. Most days, I felt utterly defeated because my well-conceived plans did not work. Children were running around, digging wherever, and picking the green tomatoes off the plants that were put in the ground the day before. So much for harvesting juicy red tomatoes! I was frustrated! The children seemed to treat the garden as

a playground, rather than a planting and growing place, and I felt discouraged by what I perceived to be their lack of respect.

As time passed, I intentionally stepped back and watched the children engaging within the garden space. While observing, it suddenly dawned on me that children’s innate urges to run, move, imagine, and play do not change when they step through the garden gate. If anything, the garden’s colors, textures, smells, and unique objects awaken and ignite children’s need to play.

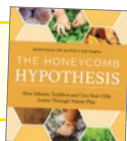
This epiphany caused a shift in my personal ideas about what a children’s garden should be—how it looks, feels, and what happens within its gate. I began to understand that a garden can be not only a special place to play, but an outdoor classroom rich in possibilities for every early learner. This left me with the conclusion: the garden needs to be more than a tomato plant!

—Clare Nugent



Clare Nugent is the founder and owner of Ferntop Nature Preschool. Ferntop is an enchanting, magical place for children to learn and grow—especially in the great outdoors. Look for her new book, “Sharing Ferntop: Lessons & Songs from Nature,” along with her companion album, “Small Wonders” found at ferntopnaturepreschool.com. Follow her on instagram @ferntop_nature

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Sandra Duncan works to assure the miracle and magic of childhood through indoor and outdoor play space environments that are intentionally designed to connect young children to their early learning environments, communities, and neighborhoods. Duncan is an international consultant, author of six books focused on the environmental design of early childhood places, designer of two furniture collections called Sense of Place and Sense of Place for Wee Ones, and adjunct faculty at Nova Southeastern University. She has designed university courses on indoor and outdoor learning environments, collaborating with architects, interior designers and educators to create extraordinary places and possibilities for children and students of all ages.



Often, a garden plot—be it large or small—is the first step toward embracing and connecting children to the natural world in a school setting. Although a wonderful opportunity for promoting children’s growth and development, it is often a missed one because of adult notions about what a garden should be: neat, organized, weed-free, and a place where children merely plant and pick. Imagine what would happen if we shifted our thinking about school gardens from the traditional context of growing food and flowers to a much richer context of instilling memories, growing bodies, and enriching minds? What if we begin seeing the garden not just as a place for growing and harvesting, but a place for playing, creating, constructing, concocting, imagining, reading... and just being a child?

Gardens as Classrooms

The landscape of a typical preschool classroom is constantly changing. Furniture is rearranged. Manipulatives are added and taken away. Wall displays are hung up and taken down. Art materials are rotated. All this change results in an ever-evolving landscape, leaving educators wishing for a pair of extra hands and someone to help. Just like the classroom, the landscape of the children’s garden is in constant flux and ever-changing. With unflinching consistency and regularity, the seasons come and go, bringing change: new colors, textures, smells, and sights for everyone to enjoy. And, for the most part, a classroom garden changes without you. In a sense, the garden is that perfect teaching partner you’re wishing for.

Begin thinking about the classroom garden as your partner in providing extraordinary learning opportunities for young children. Consider the classroom garden not as an addition to the physical classroom, but as a classroom itself. Begin thinking about the garden not as a plot of land, but as a plot for play. Consider how you could create learning centers and play areas typically found indoors, outside in the garden.

- **Dramatic Play.** Place a mud-type kitchen near the growing herbs. Include garden tools such as a mortar and pestle for pulverizing the fragrant flowers and plants.
- **Art.** Include a flat working surface for creating masterpieces. Do not forget typical art tools such as paintbrushes, crayons, and paper for the young artist. For those tools that could get soggy with rain or snow, find a weather-proof container to protect them.



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A reading nook in an out-of-the-way spot is a way to bring an indoor activity outdoors!

- **Storybook Area.** Design a reading nook under a shady shrub or in an out-of-the-way spot. A waterproof tablecloth with outdoor pillows makes a cozy nest for reading and enjoying storybooks. To protect children from the sun, create your own shade with a large cloth clipped to a fence, post, tree, or bush.
- **Construction.** Include a building area for constructing and transforming ordinary materials into inspiring child-made inventions. Use wood blocks, PVC pipe, logs, tree stumps, and other natural loose parts materials (i.e., pine cones, tree pods, sticks, sea grass, large rocks, and even unmovable boulders).
- **Science.** Add a large bucket of dirt with pots, seeds, and small shovels where children can experiment with planting and transplanting.

The Garden Players

It does not matter if you have a 4'x4' raised garden bed, an enormous fenced-in area, or just a few different-sized flower pots, there is always a grand opportunity to expand children’s understanding of natural things and, more importantly, build a garden of memories for a lifetime. To accomplish this, early childhood educators must shift their mindset to the classroom garden being more than a tomato plant—more than planting and harvesting fruits and vegetables. This new mindset requires designing a garden that meets the needs of children’s natural play urges.

Just as children learn in their own unique ways in the classroom, they also play in different ways in the garden. Some children feel compelled to look through a storybook while others are drawn to the art easel. Some children never grow weary of constructing in the block center, but others prefer setting the table in the home living area. Indeed, there are many different types of players in the classroom. The same is true for the classroom garden. Therefore, teachers have a unique opportunity (and also responsibility) to design options in the garden, being sure there is room for each type of garden player. Although there are many different types of garden players. Some common players include the collector, digger, transformer, and storyteller.

In addition to these five garden players, you may meet a variety of other types of garden players. Take a moment and observe children while they are playing in the classroom or outdoors. Think about each child as a player, and consider what kind of player he/she is. Is the child an investigator, gatherer, transformer—or something else? Some other garden players might include the following:

- **Nibblers.** Children who have a need for oral sensory input.
- **Planters.** Children who have a desire to bury seeds in the earth.
- **Artists.** Children who are compelled to create art with any and all materials that surround them.

- **Builders.** Children who make plans and then execute their ideas with inventions to help with garden work.
- **Thinkers.** Children who need refuge, and who seek out cozy, enclosed, and out-of-the-way areas in the garden to be quiet and alone.
- **Helpers.** Children who enjoy helping and willingly do whatever is needed for the greater purpose of the garden.
- **Waterers.** Children who like working with water and are continually filling up buckets and watering cans.

Children's gardens are filled with amazing lessons. Each moment spent in a garden is an opportunity for children to make amazing discoveries about themselves and the world they live in. Having play experiences in a garden is invaluable to children's positive growth and development. But, is this is enough? It is important that educators go beyond the traditional notion of a garden being just for a place to grow food. We need to be more intentional about considering each player who comes through the garden gate. We must provide opportunities and places within the garden that align with children's learning and playing styles. Doing so helps young children become grounded in the present moment, revealing that a garden is a place children want to return to again and again.



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The "Storyteller" uses the garden as another setting to fulfill his imaginative play plans and tell a story.

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The "Transformer" loves to transform materials, making them into something new and exciting.

The Common Garden Players

and How to Engage Them

Collector. This player has an urge to pick and collect for their own purposes. She collects for the sheer joy of collecting. Sometimes there is a purpose in mind for a play project, such as material for a mud pie in the kitchen or a farmer's market. You may hear comments from the collector such as, "This is for my mommy," as she gathers fistfuls of herbs or flowers.

- Include child-sized baskets and vessels of all types for collecting and gathering.
- Grow large swaths of the same type of plant for lots of fistful opportunities.
- Select garden plants that enjoy being trimmed and grow back quickly (i.e., peppermint, cosmos, dill, and holy basil).

Hint: Help the collector understand what areas of the garden beds she can harvest by posting signs with simple visual messages; Green for go (please pick) or red for stop (still growing). Simple signage can be made from a piece of wood and some paint.

Digger. The Digger likes heavy and forceful work, and simply has the need to dig! This player likes to do heavy work, use real authentic tools, see his progress, and discover worms and other treasures along the way.

- Create a dedicated area for digging. This area could be a raised bed or a simple mound of dirt.
- Include real shovels and wheelbarrows for moving and transporting the earth from place to place.
- Offer hard hats, construction trucks, pails, and scooping tools for children's forceful work.
- Place signs with corresponding visual images that read Please Dig!

Hint: Take children on a tour of the garden to point out places where they can dig and move the earth. Have shovels and other digging or moving tools positioned beforehand in the areas where digging is permitted, which visually invites children to get busy digging!

Transformer. Although this garden player likes to collect, she loves to transform materials, making them into something new and exciting. This player can also be seen as an artist who gains inspiration from colors, patterns, textures, and the overall feel of the garden. A transformer creatively changes natural materials into useful objects and enjoys artist-type experiences, such as the transformation of a watercolor painting that happens when she mixes or applies the paint to a working surface.

- Provide a mortar and pestle for grinding and changing plant material.
- Construct a simple play kitchen for messy transformation to occur.
- If possible, position this area near a source of water (i.e., garden hose, rain barrel).

Hint: Sidewalk chalk makes for a perfect material to add to play salads, mud cakes or decorating of a garden bed. Can be ground and mixed with water for paint as well.

Storyteller. A storyteller is a player who uses the garden as another setting to fulfill his imaginative play plans and tell a story. This player steps through the garden gate with a story in his mind and heart and sees everything within the garden as a prop to be used for the story unfolding in his mind and in the garden.

- Offer magical and intentional places for the storyteller to engage in dramatic play, such as see-through tents or structures with a natural growing element, such as climbing vines. An area with a little height (i.e., platforms or logs) built into the space is perfect for the storyteller.
- Provide sheets, scarves, and pieces of fabric so the storyteller can create costumes, forts, and backdrops for his story.
- The most important element needed for the storyteller is the space, time, adult support, and freedom needed to imagine and tell his story.

Hint: Utilizing the plants, insects, animal life, and the themes of gardening sets a rich stage for children to enter into and act out their stories and play. Addressing the storyteller's needs can often be an opportunity for children to slow down a bit and for the teacher to introduce new materials to enrich the experience.

Investigator. This garden player likes to seek, hunt, and explore for answers. He enjoys facts and learning new information. The investigator likes to ask questions and will often inspire others with his knowledge. The investigator is like the Pied Piper of the garden. You may observe the investigator sharing his excitement about a certain discovery and, before you know it, several other children are following him and making their own discoveries.

- Provide bug jars and magnifying glasses for closer examinations of the garden's exciting treasures.
- Have field guides available for deeper study. Laminated foldable guides will withstand the weather.
- Place a basket of small clipboards along with paper and pencil available for sketching or tallying findings and observations.

Hint: Conducting a scavenger hunt in the garden excites investigators. Scavenger hunts are purposeful and meet the "need to know" for this type of player. Find ideas for conducting a scavenger hunt on the internet or, better yet, make your own game and have children hunt for plants and insects you would find in your own space.