

My First Garden: A 10-Week Creative Gardening Adventure

Course Overview: This 10-week course is a hands-on, sensory-rich exploration of gardening designed to foster creativity, patience, and a connection to the natural world. Each lesson is built around a fun theme and can be adapted to suit the student's specific needs, abilities, and interests. The focus is on the joy of the process, not perfection. We will create a garden journal to document our entire journey from dream to harvest.

Week 1: The Garden Dreamer

Materials Needed: Large paper or poster board, crayons/markers/colored pencils, seed catalogs or gardening magazines, scissors, glue, a blank notebook for the Garden Journal.

Learning Objectives:

- Student will express their personal vision for a garden.
- Student will identify at least 5 plants they would like to grow.
- Student will begin a Garden Journal to document their plans and observations.

Activities:

1. **Dream Board Creation:** Talk about what a garden can be. Is it a pizza garden with tomatoes, basil, and oregano? A rainbow garden with colorful flowers? A sensory garden with soft and fragrant plants? Look through seed catalogs and magazines, cut out pictures of favorite plants, and glue them onto the poster board to create a "Garden Dream Board."
2. **Choosing Our Plants:** Based on the dream board, narrow down the choices. Read about a few plants to see if they grow well in your area and chosen location (sun vs. shade). Select a manageable number of plants to start with (e.g., 3-5 types).
3. **First Journal Entry:** Decorate the cover of the Garden Journal. For the first entry, paste a smaller picture of each chosen plant and write or draw why you chose it. Trace the outline of your hand and write "My Helping Hand" inside.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** If cutting is difficult, pre-cut a variety of images for the student to choose from. Use chunky markers or adapted grip pencils for drawing.
 - **Sensory:** Use textured paper or add tactile elements like fabric scraps to the dream board. Play calming nature sounds during the activity.
 - **Cognitive:** Provide a simple template for the journal entry (e.g., "I chose this plant because ____."). Focus on the creative expression rather than writing/spelling. Offer a smaller, more focused selection of plant choices to avoid feeling overwhelmed.
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Week 2: Soil Superheroes

Materials Needed: Garden space (container, raised bed, or ground plot), trowels, garden gloves, soil, compost or garden soil amendment, a clear jar with a lid, water.

Learning Objectives:

- Student will understand that good soil is essential for healthy plants.
- Student will participate in preparing the garden bed or container for planting.
- Student will conduct a simple soil texture test.

Activities:

1. **Meet the Soil:** Go to the garden spot. Feel the soil. Is it sandy, sticky, or crumbly? Talk about how soil is plant food. Explain that we can make it even better by adding compost (like a vitamin for the soil).
2. **Soil Shake Test:** Scoop some garden soil into the clear jar until it's about half full. Add water until it's almost to the top. Put the lid on tightly and shake it hard for a minute. Let it sit. Over the next hour, watch as layers form (sand on the bottom, silt in the middle, clay on top). This shows what our soil is made of! Draw the results in the Garden Journal.
3. **Prepare the Bed:** Together, add compost or new garden soil to the container or garden bed. Use trowels to mix it all together. This is a great time to dig, explore, and look for earthworms (signs of healthy soil!).

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** Use lightweight, long-handled, or ergonomic trowels. Use a raised garden bed or containers on a table for accessibility. The student can direct the action if digging is too strenuous.
- **Sensory:** Offer different types of garden gloves if the student is sensitive to the feel of soil. Conversely, for sensory seekers, this is a wonderful tactile activity.
- **Cognitive:** Break down the task of preparing the bed into very small steps (e.g., "First, we get one scoop of compost. Now, we put it here."). Use a visual schedule with pictures for each step.

Week 3: Seed Secrets & Indoor Planting

Materials Needed: Seeds for chosen plants, seed starting trays or egg cartons, seed starting mix (soil), a spray bottle, large dried beans (like lima beans), paper towels, a zip-top plastic bag.

Learning Objectives:

- Student will learn what a seed needs to sprout (water, warmth, soil).
- Student will successfully plant seeds in an indoor starter tray.
- Student will observe the parts of a seed.

Activities:

1. **Seed Dissection:** Soak a few large lima beans in water overnight. The next day, carefully peel off the outer seed coat. Gently split the seed in half to find the tiny baby plant (embryo) inside. Look at it with a magnifying glass. Draw what you see in the Garden Journal.
2. **Greenhouse in a Bag:** Wet a paper towel, wring it out, and place it in a zip-top bag with a few

beans. Seal the bag and tape it to a sunny window. Over the next week, we will watch the seeds sprout!

3. **Planting Our Indoor Seeds:** Fill the egg carton or seed tray with soil. Read the seed packet to see how deep to plant the seeds (a good rule is twice as deep as the seed is wide). Poke a small hole with a finger, drop a seed in, and cover it gently with soil. Use the spray bottle to water them. Place in a sunny spot.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** Use a small scoop for filling trays with soil. Use larger seeds (like beans, peas, or sunflowers) that are easier to handle than tiny ones (like carrots or lettuce).
- **Sensory:** Use a spray bottle for watering, which can be less overwhelming than a watering can and provides a fine motor workout.
- **Cognitive:** Create a picture-based instruction sheet for planting the seeds. Use a chart to track which seed was planted in which cell. Color-code the cells and the seed packets.

Week 4: The Great Planting Out

Materials Needed: Our sprouted seedlings from last week, any seeds for direct sowing, trowel, watering can, craft sticks, permanent markers.

Learning Objectives:

- Student will learn the difference between transplanting a seedling and direct sowing a seed.
- Student will participate in moving their plants into the main garden.
- Student will create plant markers to identify what was planted and where.

Activities:

1. **Ready, Set, Transplant!:** Gently handle the seedlings we started indoors. Show how to carefully squeeze the container to loosen the soil and lift the plant out without pulling the stem. Dig a hole in the garden just big enough for the seedling's roots, place it inside, and gently pat the soil around it.
2. **Direct Sowing:** For plants that don't like to be transplanted (like carrots or radishes), we'll plant seeds directly in the garden. Read the seed packet for spacing instructions. A fun way to do this is to make a "seed tape" by gluing seeds at the correct spacing onto a strip of toilet paper, which can then be laid in a trench and covered with soil.
3. **Marker Making:** Let's get creative! Decorate craft sticks with drawings of the plants and their names. This helps us remember what we planted. Coat them with a clear sealant if you have one, or just use permanent markers. Place them in the garden.
4. **A Big Drink:** Give all the newly planted seeds and seedlings a gentle, thorough watering.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** A seated gardening stool can make planting more comfortable. Focus on one or two transplants at a time to avoid fatigue. Use a tool to make seed furrows instead of fingers if needed.
- **Sensory:** Let the student choose the materials for the plant markers (painted rocks, sticks, etc.). If the student dislikes the feel of wet soil, they can be in charge of placing the dry markers.
- **Cognitive:** Focus on the process, not perfect spacing. Use a string line or a ruler as a visual guide

for making straight rows. Celebrate the completion of planting each and every plant.

Week 5: Water Wizards & Weed Warriors

Materials Needed: Watering can or hose with a gentle spray nozzle, Garden Journal, a sample of a common weed from the garden (roots and all).

Learning Objectives:

- Student will learn how to check if a plant needs water.
- Student will establish a regular watering routine.
- Student will be able to identify at least one common weed in their garden.

Activities:

1. **The Finger Test:** How do we know if our plants are thirsty? We use the finger test! Gently poke a finger about an inch into the soil near a plant. If the soil is dry, it's time to water. If it's damp, we can wait. Practice this in a few different spots.
2. **Watering Wisdom:** Talk about the best way to water: at the base of the plant, not on the leaves. Water deeply and less often, rather than a little bit every day. This encourages deep roots. Let the student be the "Water Wizard" in charge of checking the soil and watering when needed.
3. **What is a Weed?:** Find a common weed in the garden. Gently pull it up and look at its roots, stem, and leaves. Explain that a weed is just a plant growing where we don't want it to. In our journal, we can draw the weed and label its parts. Discuss why we remove them (they compete for water and food with our wanted plants).

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** Use a lightweight, child-sized watering can or a hose with a trigger nozzle that is easy to squeeze. For weeding, use a long-handled tool to avoid bending over.
 - **Sensory:** The repetitive, gentle motion of watering can be very calming. Make it a peaceful, quiet time in the garden.
 - **Cognitive:** Create a simple visual checklist for the day's garden tasks: 1. Check Soil. 2. Water if Dry. 3. Look for Weeds. This helps build routine and independence.
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Week 6: Garden Detectives & Helpful Critters

Materials Needed: Magnifying glass, Garden Journal, materials for a "Bug Hotel" (a small wooden box or plastic bottle with the end cut off, pinecones, hollow sticks/bamboo, bark, rolled-up cardboard).

Learning Objectives:

- Student will observe their garden ecosystem using a magnifying glass.
 - Student will learn to differentiate between a "pest" and a "beneficial" insect.
 - Student will build a simple bug hotel to attract helpful insects.
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Activities:

1. **On the Lookout:** Let's be Garden Detectives! Take the magnifying glass out to the garden. Look closely at the leaves, stems, and soil. What do you see? Can you find any insects? Are there holes in the leaves? Are there any spiderwebs?
2. **Friend or Foe?:** Talk about how some bugs are helpers (like ladybugs that eat aphids, or bees that pollinate flowers) and some can cause trouble (like aphids that suck plant juice). Look up pictures of common garden insects online or in a book. Draw any insects we find in our journal and label them as "Friend" or "Foe."
3. **Build a Bug Hotel:** Let's invite the "Friend" bugs to stay! Take your box or bottle and pack it tightly with the sticks, pinecones, bark, and other materials. This creates lots of nooks and crannies for beneficial insects like lacewings and ladybugs to live in. Place your bug hotel in a sheltered spot in the garden.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** Use a magnifying glass with a built-in light or one that is on a stand. Building the bug hotel can be a tabletop activity. Pre-cut materials to size for easier stuffing.
- **Sensory:** Exploring textures with the bug hotel materials is a great sensory activity. Talk about how each item feels (bumpy pinecone, smooth stick).
- **Cognitive:** Focus on just one or two common insects to learn about. Use a simple T-chart in the journal for "Helpers" and "Pests" and use drawings instead of words.

Week 7: The Sensory Garden Experience

Materials Needed: Your garden, your five senses, blindfold (optional), items to plant with strong sensory qualities (e.g., a fuzzy lamb's ear plant, a fragrant mint or rosemary plant, a brightly colored marigold).

Learning Objectives:

- Student will use all five senses to explore the garden.
- Student will be able to describe the garden using sensory words.
- Student will add a new plant to the garden specifically for its sensory qualities.

Activities:

1. **Five Senses Tour:** Go into the garden on a mission.
 - **Touch:** Gently feel different leaves. Are they fuzzy, waxy, smooth, or prickly? Feel the cool soil and the warm sun.
 - **Smell:** Crush a leaf from an herb plant (like basil or mint) and smell your fingers. Smell the damp earth and the sweet flowers.
 - **See:** What different shades of green can you find? What is the brightest color? Look for patterns on leaves and petals.
 - **Hear:** Stand perfectly still for one minute. What can you hear? The buzz of a bee? The rustle of leaves in the wind?
 - **Taste:** (With permission only!) If you have a safe, edible plant ready (like a strawberry or a leaf of mint), taste it!
2. **Sensory Poetry:** In the Garden Journal, create a simple poem or list of words describing the garden using the five senses. For example: "I see green. I smell dirt. I feel a fuzzy leaf..."

3. **Add a Sensory Plant:** Let's add a new plant chosen just for fun! Choose a plant with a wonderful smell (like lavender), a fascinating texture (like lamb's ear), or a brilliant color. Find a special spot for it in the garden and plant it together.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** Bring parts of the garden (a flower, a leaf, a pot of soil) to a comfortable seating area for the student to explore.
- **Sensory:** This lesson is a sensory feast, but can be overwhelming. Focus on one sense at a time. For the "hear" activity, use noise-canceling headphones to block out other sounds and focus only on garden sounds. Use a blindfold (if the student is comfortable) to heighten the other senses.
- **Cognitive:** Use a pre-made chart with pictures for each of the five senses. The student can draw or point to what they experience for each one.

Week 8: The Harvest Festival

Materials Needed: Your garden, a basket or bowl for collecting produce, scissors (optional), a small celebration treat (like a special drink or snack).

Learning Objectives:

- Student will learn how to identify when a fruit or vegetable is ripe.
- Student will practice the correct way to harvest produce from a plant.
- Student will celebrate the success and first fruits of their labor.

Activities:

1. **How Do You Know It's Ready?:** Look at the plants that are starting to produce. Read the original seed packet or look online to see what a ripe vegetable/fruit should look like. Is the tomato fully red? Is the bean pod firm and plump? Is the lettuce leaf big enough?
2. **The Gentle Harvest:** Practice how to pick things without hurting the plant. Some things, like beans, can be gently snapped off. Others, like zucchini or herbs, are best snipped with scissors. Tomatoes and strawberries can be twisted gently from the stem. Let the student lead the harvest, collecting their bounty in a special basket.
3. **First Taste & Celebration:** Wash the harvested food. This is the magical moment! Taste something right away. A sun-warmed cherry tomato or a crisp snap pea is a reward like no other. Take a picture of the student with their first harvest. Celebrate with your special snack and talk about how amazing it is to eat something you grew yourself.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** Use adaptive-loop scissors for snipping herbs or stems. Raise the harvest basket on a stool so the student doesn't have to bend to put things in it.
- **Sensory:** The celebration can be tailored to the student's preferences. It could be a quiet moment of tasting or a more festive "garden party" with music. Focus on the pride and accomplishment.
- **Cognitive:** Focus on harvesting just one type of vegetable today to keep the task simple and clear. Give simple, direct instructions: "Let's find all the red tomatoes."

Week 9: From Garden to Plate

Materials Needed: The harvested produce, other simple recipe ingredients, kitchen tools (child-safe knife, cutting board, bowls), a recipe.

Learning Objectives:

- Student will help choose and follow a simple recipe using their garden produce.
- Student will participate in preparing a meal or snack.
- Student will connect the entire process from seed to meal.

Activities:

1. **Recipe Hunt:** Look at what was harvested. What can we make? A simple salad? Herb butter for toast? A pizza with fresh basil? Look through a cookbook or online for a simple, visual recipe that uses the main ingredient. Let the student choose the recipe.
2. **Kitchen Helper:** In the kitchen, work together to prepare the food. The student can help with tasks like washing vegetables, tearing lettuce leaves, stirring ingredients, or sprinkling herbs. Talk about each step of the process.
3. **The Chef's Tasting:** Sit down together and enjoy the meal you created. Talk about the flavors. Does the basil you grew taste different from store-bought? What was the best part of making this meal? Add the recipe (or a drawing of the food) to the Garden Journal.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** Use adaptive kitchen tools like rocker knives or stabilized cutting boards. All prep can be done at a table. Assign tasks that match the student's physical abilities, such as mixing or adding pre-measured ingredients.
- **Sensory:** The kitchen has many smells and sounds. If this is overwhelming, break the activity into shorter sessions. The student can also wear an apron to keep clean, which can be grounding for some.
- **Cognitive:** Use a visual recipe with pictures for each step. Pre-measure all other ingredients so the student can focus on combining them.

Week 10: Garden Celebration & Future Fun

Materials Needed: Garden Journal, camera or phone, paper, small envelopes, art supplies.

Learning Objectives:

- Student will document and reflect on the 10-week gardening journey.
- Student will learn the basics of saving seeds for next year.
- Student will begin to plan for a future garden.

Activities:

1. **Garden Scrapbook:** Look back through the Garden Journal. Take final photos of the garden and the student in it. Print the photos and add them to the journal to create a final scrapbook of the season. Talk about the favorite parts of the project. What was the biggest challenge? What was the biggest success?

2. **Saving Seeds for Next Year:** Choose an easy plant for seed saving (like beans or peas). Let some pods dry completely on the vine. Open them up and collect the dry seeds inside. Talk about how this is the start of next year's garden. Decorate a small envelope to store the seeds in a cool, dry place.
3. **Dreaming Again:** Get out a fresh piece of paper. Ask: "What should we do differently next year? What do we want to plant again? What new things should we try?" Start a new dream sheet for the next season, showing that a garden is a wonderful, continuous cycle of life.

Adaptations & Accommodations:

- **Physical:** The scrapbook activity can be done at a table. Use a digital photo album or slideshow if handling physical photos and glue is difficult.
- **Sensory:** Let the student choose the music for the celebration. The feel and sound of dry seeds in a jar can be a pleasant sensory experience.
- **Cognitive:** Reflection can be guided with simple questions: "Show me the picture of your favorite day." "What plant was the most fun to grow?" When planning for the next garden, offer just two or three choices at a time.