

Playing in the Garden



Did you know the amount of time children spend in undirected play is declining and is linked to increasing mental health concerns?

Play that is self-directed and self-controlled is a highly effective way children learn. Popular opinion suggests play is for children, but there's no reason it should end with one's youth. In fact, playfulness into adulthood is positively associated with life satisfaction. Not every garden task is fun, but finding a balance and incorporating intentional play can provide a more positive experience and overall improved well-being.

Miniature gardening is one way to play in the garden. Bringing in fairies and gnomes creates a whimsical setting that promotes creativity as you design small-scale living scenes.

Here are some tips to get your miniature garden started:

- Decide whether you want a miniature garden in a container or in-ground to help decide the size of the accents you will include.
- Choose a single feature, such as a miniature house, to direct the design. Many craft stores have entire sections dedicated to miniatures, though you may also enjoy building your own. Our yard hosts a combination of purchased and handmade features.
- Miniature gnomes and fairies can be purchased or handmade using acorns, pinecones and miscellaneous other plant materials.
- Shaded areas of the landscape make great locations for miniature gardens. Protection from the sun prolongs the life of the accessories. Shade-loving plants such as hostas and caladiums are perfect hosts for gnomes and fairies with large leaves towering over the scene providing shelter.
- Look for miniature plant varieties, such as Hosta 'Blue Mouse Ears', which maintain their compact size.
- Choose slow-growing plants for containerized miniature gardens to avoid outgrowing the container too quickly. Small houseplants work well for this purpose, but will need to be brought indoors during the winter.



Mental Health Monday

If you have young gardeners in your life, take advantage of the upcoming summer break from school and put them to work (or play) creating miniature garden features. Here are some easy and quick DIY creations they may enjoy:



- tire swing out of a Hot Wheels car tire
- gazing ball using a marble on a golf tee
- robin nest: paint several pebbles “robin blue” and glue them into an acorn cap
- ties twigs together with twine and create a rope ladder
- turn a broken terra cotta pot upside down/on its side to make a miniature home using the broken opening as the door
- use a golf tee as a bird bath
- build an arbor out of twigs tied together with twine or wire



Once you get started the creativity will abound. One year my elementary-aged son decided to build a monster truck rally in our gnome garden using his diecast cars. It wasn't the look I was going for, but it sure was fun playing in the garden with him.

Don't forget to share your miniature garden with us! Email Cynthia at cdom@ksu.edu if you have a miniature garden story to tell.

Cynthia Domenghini, Horticulture Extension Specialist



Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service
K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



National Institute of Food and Agriculture
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

May 6, 2024