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Garden-Fresh Recipes to Pick and Make with Kids, from Sylvia's Table

By SIOBHAN ADCOCK

Getting kids into the kitchen to learn about food and cooking is one of the best ways to teach young people that little tiny essential life skill, being able to feed yourself well. Giving kids first-hand experience in the gardens and farms where their foods are grown is just as important, and just as much fun.

That's the bright idea that guides the Sylvia Center at Katchkie Farm in Kinderhook, NY. The Sylvia Center program brings kids from the New York City area to a working farm, where they get their first experience in picking and making a meal from fresh produce (you'll want to watch this great video about the Sylvia Center's work, if for no other reason than to watch the kids blissfully petting the Katchkie Farm chickens at about 4:11). Sylvia Center founder Liz Neumark spoke with us on the eve of the publication of her new cookbook, *Sylvia's Table*, and shared her ideas for bringing some of the Katchkie Farm spirit home, including what to plant in a family garden that kids and grown-ups can work on together.

Neumark also shared four delicious recipes from the book that are perfect to pick-and-make right now, with the help of your favorite

young person. Hit the farmer's market or the garden this weekend with your junior sous chef to pick some of the tomatoes, herbs,

and zucchini that are in such abundance, and make a summer meal together.



Epicurious: What are some of the things kids learn from spending time at the Sylvia Center at Katchkie Farm? What are the highlights of a typical visit?

Liz Neumark: Coming to the farm is often the first time most of our kids have actually been on a real working farm, and that creates a memorable moment in and of itself. Everything we show them and do together afterwards

is a part of this wow-experience. And that is what we want; to create an experience that will resonate with them so they remember the tastes, the smells, the landscape and of course, the skills.

That is just the beginning. They walk through along the farm road, sometimes catching a glimpse of Farmer Bob and the farm crew working hard in the fields, and arrive at the specially designated and developed Children's Garden; laid out to accommodate their

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wayward feet, small hands and giant curiosity. The garden has over 200 different varieties of vegetables, fruits, edible flowers, and herbs. They are exposed to different looking foods: melons with red and yellow stripes on the outside, spicy and sweet flowers to taste, unusual beans from a pod, multi-colored corn. They learn that food comes in all shapes and sizes and colors and that food fresh from a garden, and in season, tastes the best. After visiting the garden and harvesting crops for preparing their meal, they learn that vegetables can be used to make so many delicious things!

The children participate in and learn about every step of the story of food from seed to plate: learning what a seed needs to grow; how to plant, care for, cultivate, and harvest; learning prep skills like using knives and other kitchen tools; and experiencing sitting down to a communal meal.

Epi: In the book, you write, "Most children today have been exposed to a greater range of flavors than we were when we were very young, and their tastes are more developed, even for spicy foods. I cannot count the number of times I meet children who can rattle off their favorite sushi!" What are some of the other things you wish more grownups knew about how children think about food?

LN: These are observations from watching my city slicker kids--the ones I meet through my work as a caterer. They are sophisticated eaters, often dining out with their families multiple times a month. I think this knowledge should signal a readiness to learn more significant food lessons beyond ordering from a menu. This is the moment to go into the kitchen with them and 'get messy,' and adults, parents, and caregivers should make time for cooking family meals. It's great that they have sophisticated palates and showing them the source of these meals by shopping and cooking together will only deepen their connection

to good food and healthy eating habits. Knowing that you have the skills to prepare good food is probably more important than knowing how to order it!

Grownups should not be afraid to introduce new flavors to children. And they should be patient and subtle in the ways they seek to broaden palates. I have witnessed the willingness or openness of kids,

while they are cooking and working around food, to take a taste or nibble of something new. And one of the big lessons I try to share is that when you are cooking with kids, that experimentation is much more likely to happen. When kids cook an ingredient with which they are unfamiliar, they are more likely to take a taste of it. They become invested in their own work--try it!



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Epi: Kids who visit the Sylvia Center at Katchkie Farms have the amazing, educational, fun experience of picking foods that they then prepare and eat together. What might you suggest planting and growing in an ideal family garden that would encourage similar pick-and-make experiences at home?

LN: What a great question! Some of us have a window-sill as our growing space and others have backyards. Both are suitable for herbs which can grow in small cups or gardens. They are fast growing and can be snipped into a wide variety of foods, from eggs, to meat and poultry, to pasta and veggies. Their varying flavors make for great experimentation. It would also be fun to experiment with sprouting recognizable seeds--peas, avocado pits, potatoes. And while they won't yield veggies on a window sill, it is nonetheless inspiring to see how things grow; that a seed yields a plant which in turn yields a vegetable. For possible potted plants, try cherry tomatoes or small peppers. I love rhubarb and strawberries--so plant those together and consider giving up your day job to create strawberry-rhubarb delights! They are both late spring perennials, though not always perfectly



coordinated with their growing. Other prolific outdoor veggies include summer squash and cucumbers--which need room to spread out, but will provide lots of produce for a wide range of cooking projects.

I find planting edible blossoms, like nasturtium, an endless source of wonder to children, while at the same time, are delicious.

And the next best thing to growing it yourself (especially for our urban kids) is going to the farmers market or community gardens. It would be a wonderful experience to speak to different farmers and solicit advice for a home garden. I would love to hear what different farmers say. Developing an awareness of foods that grow at different times of the season can be found in one's own

garden, but also in visiting the farmers market. I also recommend visiting markets on all vacations or trips. That too is amazing, educational and fun!

Growing in a home garden also opens the door to talking about climate and weather patterns, providing an awareness that successful growing is linked to proper environmental conditions like rain and sun.

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