Help 4-H’ers enjoy the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor

Source: Ashley Osborne, 4-H youth development specialist

Many families have planted gardens this year as an activity to pass the time during the COVID-19 pandemic. With many crops soon reaching maturity, here are some tips on harvesting and using your homegrown produce.

Just as at planting time, invite your young person to be involved with the harvest. Harvest will give them a sense of accomplishment in a job well done and is a perfect opportunity to teach them about plants, biology and their natural world.

Many crops you planted in the early spring like cabbage, broccoli and carrots are ready to harvest. You may also have some tomatoes, corn or peppers that will be ready soon. If you are not sure when a particular plant should be harvested, your family can visit the Junior Master Gardener website at https://jmgkids.us/lgeg/grow/harvest-indicators/ to learn about the signs of harvest for some of the most commonly grown fruits and vegetables. This site has visual images and quizzes that can help your family learn when a particular crop is ready to be picked.

Harvesttime provides a great opportunity to teach your young person about nutrition and how plants positively contribute to our diet. Explain to them how certain vegetables give us essential vitamins and minerals and how we need to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables to get the nutrients we need to live healthy lives. For example, carrots are a great source of vitamin A, and vitamin A helps our eyesight, reduces our risk for certain cancers, boosts our immunity, supports healthy bones and reduces our chance of getting acne.

Once you have harvested some vegetables, it is now time to prepare them. Continue to involve young people as the food moves to the kitchen. All young people can help in food preparation. Younger ones can wash produce and stir ingredients. Most youth will be able to help you measure ingredients, or you can teach them how to if they have never done so before. Older youth can help chop vegetables. This is a great time to talk about food safety practices, such as handwashing, clean surfaces and proper cook times, and how each of those help reduce our risk of contracting a food-borne illness. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture have many great recipes that include seasonal produce through their Plate It Up Kentucky Proud project. These are available online at https://fcs-hes.ca.uky.edu/content/plate-it-kentucky-proud. The Junior Master Gardener website also has several garden recipes and videos available online at https://jmgkids.us/gardenkitchen/.

Research shows that children are more likely to try new foods they have had a hand in growing and preparing. Now is a great time to use the garden as a tool to get your picky-eater to try new foods. After the meal is prepared, eat it together as a family. Talk about gardening with your children. Ask them questions about the garden. What do they think about the results? Would they like to grow the same thing or try something different next year? What was their favorite activity in the garden?

For more information on gardening with your 4-H’er, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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