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Indoor Winter Garden Fun for Children

The novelty of the shiniest Christmas present can wear off, and your child or grandchild says, "I'm bored." It's time for some indoor gardening activities that will keep them interested through the cold weather. They will get excited watching nature in action indoors while everything outdoors is tucked up for the winter. Here are six tried-and-tested projects that your child will love.

Construct a Rain Gauge

You will need a plastic bottle (2-liter soda bottle, 20-ounce soda bottle, or 16-ounce water bottle), a ruler, a piece of string about 14-inches long, adhesive tape, a permanent marker, and a handful of marbles, pebbles, or gravel.

Method

- Cut off the top of the plastic bottle with a knife or scissors before handing it to your child.
- Have the child use a ruler to mark 0-12 inches on the string with a magic marker.
- Instruct the child to tape the piece of string to the bottle so that the 0-inch mark is at the bottom. With a permanent marker put the inches on the bottle next to the marks on the string.
- Remove the string. The child may decorate the bottle with the permanent marker. (Any other type of marker or crayon will wash away when it rains.)
- Put the marbles, pebbles, or gravel in the bottom of the bottle to stop it from toppling and place it on a flat surface outside to collect the rain.
- Have the child go outside frequently to check where the water line is and graph the results in a notebook or on a chart. Unlike glass, the plastic gauge will stand some frozen water.

Create a Miniature Desert

Try cultivating an indoor garden on a sunny windowsill with plants that do well inside in the winter. A south- or west-facing window is a good place to try a succulent garden. Choose a low container that has drainage holes. Have your child fill it with a potting mix formulated for cacti, then add plants and rocks. Select succulents without thorns or bristles. Echeveria species are a good choice or try a jade plant (*Crassula* spp.) or Kalanchoe. Tell your child to be careful not to overwater — if the soil feels moist it does not need watering.

Plant a Windowsill Herb Garden

Herbs are an excellent choice for south-facing windowsills. You don't have to purchase an herb garden kit; you can grow herbs in small butter tubs or a colorful pot. If the container does not have drainage holes, be sure to add them. Your child will enjoy decorating leftover containers with paper, craft jewels, and yarn. Fill the container with a soilless growing mix. Help your child to sow seeds of herbs such as basil, chives, or parsley, following the directions on the seed packet. When they are ready to harvest, involve your child with trimming the herbs. They may not be able to cut them, but they can hold a container to put the cuttings in. Children may be more willing to try new flavors using the herbs from their own windowsill herb garden.

Make a Terrarium

A terrarium is another type of indoor garden. It is a miniature garden grown in a covered glass or plastic container that you can make easily out of an old mayonnaise jar or fishbowl. You will need a soilless potting medium, charcoal, small indoor or tropical plants, small objects, such as animal figurines, and clear plastic wrap to cover the opening.

Method

- Clean the container using soapy water and rinse well.
- Place a layer of horticultural charcoal in the bottom of the container to absorb toxins and odors. Top with moist (not wet) potting mix, to approximately one-half full, allowing enough room for plant roots.
- Add plants. The best ones are small, slow-growing, and perform well in humid environments. Examples are small ferns, miniature begonias,

miniature African violets, and baby's tears (*Soleirolia*). Miniature begonias also like the humidity, but don't like wet feet, so add perlite to the growing mix.

- Your child can be creative and arrange small objects to make a miniature landscape.
- Cover the terrarium with plastic and put it on a windowsill with indirect lighting. Do not place in strong, direct sunlight.
- Observe the terrarium closely for the first few days to check the moisture level. The sides and cover should get misty with water droplets when in bright light.

Feed the Birds

Feeding the birds is a fun activity (although not a true gardening project.) Stock up with birdseed at the garden center and have your child make one or more of the following: a pinecone bird feeder, a bagel bird feeder, a cereal bird feeder, or a toilet paper roll bird feeder. Add string to pinecones, coat them with peanut butter, and roll them in birdseed. Cut a bagel in half and attach string or ribbon through the hole. Have your child spread peanut butter over the bagel, then dredge it with seed. Young children can practice fine motor skills by threading circle-shaped cereal onto a long string. First tie a knot at the end that's big enough so the cereal can't drop through. Tie the ends of the string together when it is full and secure it to a tree or porch. Save your empty toilet paper rolls. Run a long piece of string through one of them and tie the ends together. Have your child smear peanut butter all over the surface of the roll then roll it through birdseed. Hang it for all to see. If your child has a peanut allergy, use a cooking fat such as shortening. Your child may keep a record of the various species that come to the feeder.

Force Bulbs to Bloom

Paperwhites (*Narcissus*) will grow happily and bloom with nothing more than water and stones or pebbles. Find paperwhite bulbs at your local garden center, big box store, or online. Use a vase or bowl made of glass so the child can observe the roots growing. Have your child place a 2" layer of stones or pebbles in the bottom of a small vase or about 4" in a larger container. The child should arrange the paperwhite bulbs close together on top of the stones with the roots facing down and the pointed part up. Put a few stones or pebbles around and between the bulbs to anchor them, leaving the tops exposed. Add water until the level reaches just below the base of the bulbs. If the bulbs sit in water, they will rot. Place the container in a cool place away from direct heat. Remind your child to check frequently and add water when the level falls 1" below the surface of the stones. When your child sees the roots are well developed, after about three weeks, move the container to a sunny window. Paperwhites tend to topple when they bloom; support them with bamboo stakes and twine when the shoots are about 8" tall. After the paperwhites have finished blooming, toss them on the compost pile as they won't bloom again indoors.

If you want to make your children gardeners for life, keep their interest alive during the winter months with fun gardening-type activities. And they may just stop saying that they are bored.

Written by Pamela Hubbard, Master Gardener <https://extension.psu.edu/indoor-winter-garden-fun-for-children>

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