

Getting kids into gardening can get them eating healthy

WICHITA – Children are typically more likely to eat food they grow, and, while that's a tip for parents who'd like their kids to eat more vegetables, the benefits of gardening as a family extend beyond the dinner table, a Kansas State University Research and Extension horticulturist said.

Most parents remember a time when they scolded their children for playing in the dirt, yet children have a natural curiosity about the earth, said Evelyn Neier, a 4-H youth development specialist and state coordinator for the Junior Master Gardener program.

Parents' willingness to invest time in a small family garden can build on their child's interest, while helping a child learn about the environment, how plants grow, and more about the food he or she eats, she said.

Children who grow up as gardeners also generally demonstrate a greater concern for the environment later in life, said Neier, who urged parents to "start with a small plot or ... container gardening."

"Be realistic," said Neier, who advised beginning gardeners to choose one or two varieties of flowers and vegetables, such as a

spring salad crops. Lettuce, spinach, radishes and green onions can typically be started at the end of March to yield produce in May.

"Inviting a child to help with soil preparation, choosing seeds and starter plants, planting, watering (if needed) and weeding can help the child learn more about the process," the horticulturist said.

"Invite is a key word, as gardening as a family usually works best if viewed as an opportunity, rather than a chore," she said.

Once a garden is planted, checking to see seeds sprout and plants grow can draw a child's interest. Suggesting that a child choose produce for a meal and help to pre-

pare it builds skills in selecting produce and preparing meals.

Integrating flowers with vegetables adds color to a family garden, and generates opportunities for children to share with family and friends.

Information about Kansas' Junior Master Gardener Program is available online at www.Kansas4-H.org. Click on programs, and then Junior Master Gardeners.



Cleaning up old irises reduces infestation risk

MANHATTAN - An easy, "green" way to promote iris health is to remove last year's leaves and other debris before the plant sends up new leaves this spring.

"Irises have two major pests -- both of which overwinter in or on old iris foliage and flower stalks," explained Ward Upham, horticulturist with Kansas State University Research and Extension.

The fungus that causes iris leaf spot lives in iris beds year-round. It spreads by producing spores that travel from last year's to this year's foliage -- typically via wind or splashing rain during spring, he said.

The first symptoms reflect the disease's name: small leaf spots, one-eighth to one-fourth inch wide. Often, the rim of each spot is reddish. The surrounding leaf tissue often looks water-soaked, but then yellows. The spots enlarge after the plant flowers. They may grow together, killing part or all of infected leaves.

"Sometimes the disease will affect the flower stalks and buds, too. But, even then, an outbreak won't kill the plant. Iris leaf spot is deadly only in that repeated attacks can reduce plant vigor to the point that the iris dies anyway," Upham said. "Unfortunately, irises in some parts of Kansas may

be reaching that point, because we've had such a string of wet springs."

Iris borers are the newly hatched young of a moth that lays its eggs on dead iris debris during fall. In April, the tiny larvae emerge to chew on the surface of the year's new iris leaves, causing scars. As they grow, however, the larvae disappear. They bore into the leaves -- each one generally leaving behind a pinhole, small slit or ragged leaf edge.

"Then they mine down toward the rhizome, eating and growing as they go. By July, though, watchful gardeners in this part of the country can kill the larvae by hand. All they have to do is squeeze infested leaves in the vicinity of the plant injury," the horticulturist said.

"That stops the borers before they can enter the rhizome and hollow it out, maturing at 2 inches long and often setting the stage for bacterial rot."

Upham said other "green" management steps that promote iris health are 1) keep iris beds uncrowded, 2) don't water irises from overhead, 3) remove and dispose of spotty leaves and/or borer-infested rhizome parts, and 4) initially clean up iris beds in late fall.

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