

# Keep Your Children Safe in the Landscape

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

**Children can learn new skills, have fun, play and develop self-confidence by spending time in the home landscape and garden. Adults can make the home landscape and garden safe for kids by following some simple safety guidelines.**

The Master Gardener volunteers provided a tour of the Discovery Garden located in Carbide Park to youth (see photo) as part of a summer enrichment program sponsored by Greater St. Matthews Baptist Church located in Hitchcock. Sixty-one excited kids entered the Discovery Garden last Wednesday at 8:15 a.m. To borrow

from Mr. Rogers, I opine that it is a wonderful day in the neighborhood when you can get kids interested in gardening. Even though the primary objective of the tour was to inspire kids about the wonders of gardening, we also had to plan for the safety of the kids.

Well before their arrival, we scouted the Discovery

Garden for fire ant activity and treated active mounds with an insecticidal dust. We also scouted for and eliminated any poison ivy plants.

Poison ivy seedlings can become established in any yard. Several species of songbirds feed on the small whitish-yellow berries of poison ivy.



When the seeds pass intact through a bird's digestive system and lands on fertile or disturbed soil, a new plant sprouts. Watch for this vine with leaves-of-three and immediately eliminate it if you find any. If needed, herbicides such as glyphosate and trichlopyr can be used to control it.

Spending time in the landscape with children, especially young ones, requires adults to pay careful attention. Just as you would childproof an indoor room, it's important to take safety precautions in the yard to keep young ones safe. The following are some tips on outdoor safety with children.

- Never leave a toddler or young child outdoors unattended.
- As they become old enough to understand, teach your children never to eat any plant unless an adult is supervising. While eating fruits and vegetables you've grown yourself is part of the joy of gardening, many common ornamental plants can make you sick if you eat them since some may be very poisonous. A free list of common poisonous plants is available from the Galveston County Extension Office, or check out the many excellent poisonous plants sites on the Internet.
- Do not allow children to eat soil from the garden. Some soils may contain relatively high amounts of lead or other toxic substances and should not be consumed.
- Check for plants with spiny leaves or thorns – such as cactuses, roses,

yucca, hollies or pyracantha. Point out any potential hazards to children and fence off areas or plants that should be avoided. Remove dangerous plants, if necessary, especially if they are close to a play area. Do not plant spiny plants next to raised porches, decks or steps where children might fall into them.

- Despite their sometimes colorful labels, garden chemicals can be very dangerous if mishandled. If you have garden pesticides, be sure to store them in locked cabinets in their original containers. This includes organic pesticides, some of which are quite toxic. Never use empty food or drink containers for storing pesticides, cleaning supplies or fertilizers! Do not leave pesticide containers out while using them. Put them up promptly in a safe location after you have mixed the material. Children should never be around while pesticides are being mixed or applied.
- Be especially watchful of young children around ponds, pools, large puddles, buckets and large containers of any sort. Fence off ponds or other aquatic features if necessary.
- Most insects in the garden are harmless except in cases where individuals exhibit hypersensitive reactions to stings. Even insects that can sting, such as bees and wasps, generally will not be a problem if they are left alone. Do, however, watch out for potential problems and discuss with your children how best to deal with insects they encounter and precautions they

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should take. Control any fire ant hills in the area where children are likely to play or garden.

- Use stakes taller than your toddlers for plants that need support. Short stakes can cause eye injuries to kids. Adults should also be careful around stakes.
- Though fences are no substitute for a watchful eye, they offer a good option to helping keep a wandering young one in bounds. Rails are especially important on high decks to prevent falls. Also, keep deck furniture away from all railings of raised decks or balconies, since children can climb onto the furniture and over the rails.
- Always wash hands after gardening and use antiseptics on cuts or scrapes.
- Store the gas tanks for propane grills so that children cannot reach the knobs.
- Do not operate a lawn mower or string trimmer (a.k.a. "weed eater") when children are in the yard, even if they are well away from you. These powerful tools can throw objects considerable distances with great force. It's also a good idea to check adjoining yards to see if kids are in the area.
- Make sure there is no direct access to the street or driveway from the children's play area.