



PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

Part of the fairy garden at Discovery Garden, located at River Forks Park.

Question: My grandchildren are coming to visit soon, and I generally like to engage them in some sort of gardening activity. However, they will be here in the middle of our cold, dark, rainy season so I'm at a loss for ideas. Do you have any suggestions that can expand their gardening know-how and at the same time, be fun and engaging?

Answer: Well, gardening this time of year certainly does pose some challenges. I admire your desire to engage your grandchildren in gardening activities. Those moments will be cherished memories in the years to come for all parties involved.

My suggestion to you is to design and plant a fairy garden. This can be done regardless of the season or weather. This gardening project can be as simple or as elaborate as you desire. This is a fun and easy way to spark a child's interest in gardening.

What is a fairy garden? A fairy garden, simply put, is a small, miniature garden that sparks the imagination and may remind us of the fairy tales read as a child. For the youngsters of today, it may remind



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them of a Disney movie or a popular cartoon. The design of a fairy garden is only limited by our own imagination.

The first decision is what type of vessel to use. For instance, will you use a flower pot, a small bucket, a shallow dish, an old shoe, a stump or something else that you can re-purpose? Since you will be planting live plants, the vessel will need drainage holes. The container you pick should be at least 6 inches deep and at least 14 inches across to allow enough space for the plants and any whimsical extras you may use to decorate.

Depending on the ages of your grandchildren, you may want to work together on one fairy garden or you may have each grandchild work on an individual fairy garden. Regardless, the next decision is the theme of the fairy garden. Will it be a beach theme, an English cottage theme, a castle theme or a tree

house theme? These are just a few ideas. In reality, your grandchildren may come up with an original theme based on individual likes and interests.

Once you decide upon a theme, it is time to collect the materials needed. Many times materials can be found around the yard or house. Craft stores, nurseries and online companies also sell decorative items for fairy gardens.

Using the proper soil insures success. Ready-mixed, peat-lite terrarium mix is an excellent choice with its blend of peat moss, vermiculite and perlite. Another good choice is potting soil with fertilizer added. You may want to add small pieces of bark, pebbles or moss on top to create little paths.

Plant selection comes next. The plants you choose should be able to thrive in a small, confined space. They need to be delicate, compact in size and hopefully colorful. They should enhance the type of fairy garden landscape you are trying to create.

Fairy gardens can be found indoors or outdoors, and the plant selection will differ. Since you are asking about a



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winter gardening project, plant selection will be limited; however, it should be fairly easy to find succulents such as sedum, hens and chicks, and other Sempervivum species this time of year. There are many types of succulents to choose from in a variety of colors and shapes.

Also consider using small dwarf conifers like a bonsai, alpine white spruce or juniper. Keep in mind, though, that these may require frequent pruning.

If you decide to create a fairy garden once the weather improves, there will be many more plant selections from which

to choose. Herbs would be a good choice. Select creeping thyme, woolly thyme, dwarf rosemary, purple sage, golden marjoram and chives. These plants remain small, smell good and can be used in the kitchen.

Other plant selections could be small varieties of hostas, trillium, snap dragons, primrose, miniature ivy, baby tears, dwarf iris, creeping phlox or violets. When you start planting, don't overcrowd the container because you will be adding additional items to decorate your fairy garden landscape.

Hopefully your grandchildren will have fun using their imagination creating the perfect fairy garden. While they are working on the creative aspect, you will be able to instill a little more gardening knowledge as you discuss soil type, the importance of drainage and plant selection. Enjoy the process and your grandchildren will have cherished memories as you all work together on this fun, gardening project.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu.