

Gardening with Children



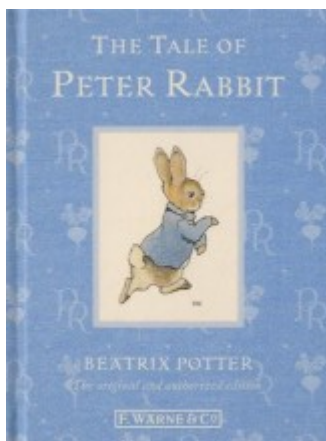
"Then comes the time for the young to discover the pleasures of digging in the dirt..." (from Parents' Choice)

Instructions.

- 1. Beatrix Potter's The Tale of Peter Rabbit. Warne, \$6.95 (Paperback)***
- 2. Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden. Signet, \$3.95 (Paperback)***
- 3. Robert Louis Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses. Dover, \$2.50 (Paperback)***
- 4. Combine one or all with a packet of seeds***

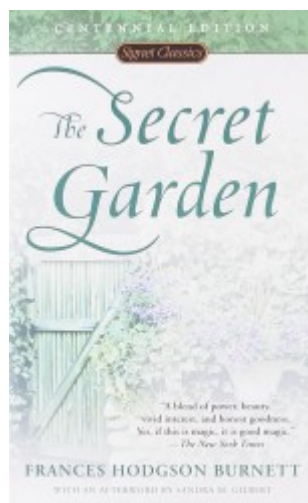
A generation of parents (some of whom are now grandparents) grew up listening to Joni Mitchell's song *Woodstock* and her advice: "We got to get ourselves back to the garden." Those who took that advice learned what others know: the deep content and even pride of walking amidst one's own tomatoes and peppers and lettuce, a satisfaction that seems more solid and less ostentatious than other kinds of accomplishments. As the poet Abraham Cowley suggested, we really need few things in life: "May I a small house and a large garden have; and a few friends, and many books."

In the springtime, weeds and grasses sprout everywhere like overactive kindergartners. Then comes the time for the young to discover the pleasures of digging in the dirt and thereby learning, in this roundabout way, the meaning of birth and resurrection. In the absence of a plot of land to garden, there are always window-boxes and pots and even visits to well-laid-out and public gardens. Among the greatest possible gifts to a kid is a packet of seeds and some stories.

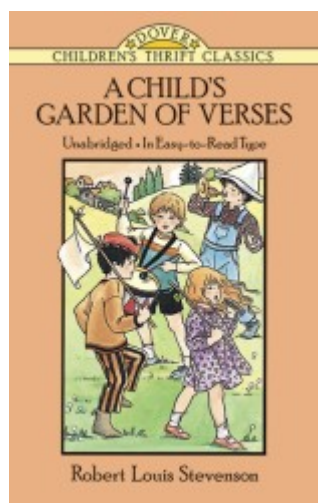


The horticultural memories of my childhood are intimately connected to Beatrix Potter's [*The Tale of Peter Rabbit*](#) since my sister and I (under Peter's inspiration) used to steal lovely, cool carrots from our neighbors' garden; I realize now that our neighbors knew of our thefts and did not object, but indulged us and our fond belief that we were doing something forbidden. Ever since Eden, part of the fascination of gardens has been with the forbidden. So, in that regard, when planting

seeds with the young and tending plants, adults might read them fairy tales about *Jack and the Beanstalk* (and his larcenies after planting seeds), *Rapunzel* (which begins with thefts from a witch's garden), and *Beauty and the Beast* (which gets launched when a rose is taken from a monster's garden).



But, of course, the greatest work to take up with children while gardening is Frances Hodgson Burnett's [*The Secret Garden*](#). It is one of my favorite children's books, and surveys indicate that this is so for many who have listed it among the most influential books of their lives. In its story of Mary, Dickon, and Colin bringing back to life an abandoned rose garden, we encounter a profound lesson in mutuality: in making the world and garden a better place, they simultaneously make themselves better people.



While only some of the poems in Robert Louis Stevenson's [*A Child's Garden of Verses*](#) actually deal with gardening, in recent years I have come to love this book; for me, that has meant getting behind the book's reputation for sentimentality and discovering Stevenson's unusually keen presentations of the ways kids think. One of these poems, *Night and Day*, is especially good in telling how children believe the Whole World awaits their waking up and how in the morning the plants in a garden await the return of their playmate. It recalls a favorite passage from *The Song of Solomon*:

"Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden, and enjoy its choicest fruits."

Originally appeared in Parents' Choice (June 2005). I can't think about this subject without remembering my Irish grandfather who on St. Patrick's Day always planted his garden on the family ranch in Montana.