



PLANT DISCOVERY CHALLENGE | *What's growing?*

FOR THIS ADVENTURE, GET ACQUAINTED WITH UTAH'S PLANTS

This challenge is designed to help your preschooler discover the amazing world of plants, understand where food comes from, and engage in hands-on stewardship in their own backyard or local park.

WHY DIG IN?

Gardening and plant exploration offer unique sensory and educational experiences.

- Working with soil, water, and seeds **develops fine motor skills** and **hand-eye coordination**.
- Caring for a living plant teaches **responsibility, patience, and the fundamental concept** of life cycles.
- Furthermore, a simple planting activity can **connect children to the source of their food** and foster a lifelong appreciation for the environment.

PLANT AND LIFE CYCLE SKILLS

These activities offer hands-on experience with the process of growth, from seed to sprout.

What To Do

Learning Goal

My Tiny Seed Project: Plant a large, fast-growing seed (like a bean or squash) in a cup with soil. Help your child water it and find a sunny spot. Check it daily for the first tiny green sprout!

Teaches the life cycle of a plant, encourages patience, and practices fine motor skills (scooping soil, gentle watering).

The Potted Herb Garden: Purchase or grow a small herb plant like mint or basil. Have your child gently pinch off leaves for a meal (such as spaghetti sauce or salad). Talk about the smell and taste!

Engages smell and taste senses, introduces the concept of harvesting, and teaches care for a perennial plant.

Watering & Weeding Crew: Give your child a small watering can (or spray bottle) to care for an outdoor plant or small section of a garden. Show them how to gently pull out weeds (not the flowers!) from the soil.

Develops responsibility and nurturing skills while improving fine motor control and identification of desired plants.

Dig and Plant a Flower: Give your child a small trowel or spoon and help them dig a shallow hole in a garden bed or flowerpot. Let them gently place a flower (or seedling) in the hole and cover the roots with soil.

Develops gross motor skills (digging, squatting) and teaches the proper technique for planting and caring for established plants.





PLANT OBSERVATION & GROSS MOTOR SKILLS

These activities get children moving and actively observing plants in a yard, park, or managed green space.

What To Do

Learning Goal

Leaf Collection Fun: Find and collect 3–5 different types of fallen leaves. Look for differences in color, shape, and size. Use a crayon and paper for a rubbing to keep!

Encourages close observation for comparing and contrasting, and develops artistic creativity.

Wildflower Scavenger Hunt: Go on a designated walk (desert in spring, mountains in summer). Look for specific colors (red paintbrush, yellow mule's ears) or shapes (bell-shaped columbine). Ask, "Which is the smallest/biggest?"

Encourages seasonal observation and simple identification (color/shape) while building endurance for a focused walk.

The Tree Detective: Find a small, safe tree. Gently touch the trunk and describe the bark (rough, bumpy, smooth). Look up at the branches and talk about how tall the tree is compared to them.

Builds vocabulary (texture words) and introduces the concept of scale/height while fostering respect for large natural objects.

Wetland Wonders: Visit a safe, accessible pond, wetland, or stream. Look for plants that grow in the water, like cattails, rushes, or lily pads. Describe their size and shape.

Introduces aquatic ecosystems, improves balance on uneven banks, and expands knowledge of plant habitats.

The Tiny World Search: On a log, rock, or tree trunk, search for bright green moss, colorful crusty lichens, or (if present) mushrooms/toadstools! (Adults: Remember the "Look, Don't Touch" rule).

Engages close-up vision and teaches children about the unique, small, non-flowering members of the plant/fungi kingdom.

Garden Adventure Day: Visit a local public garden, arboretum, or greenhouse. Walk through a display, follow a path, and look for the biggest flower, the tallest tree, or the strangest-looking plant.
Many nature centers and gardens in Utah participate in Museums for All, providing free or discounted admission for people receiving food assistance (SNAP benefits).

Provides a structured walking goal (gross motor), introduces plant diversity, and helps kids adapt to a new environment.

PLANT WISDOM & GOOD STEWARDSHIP

These activities and tips are designed to enhance your preschooler's experience and teach your family to be respectful, responsible visitors in all green spaces.

What To Do

Learning Goal

Look, Don't Touch (or Taste!): Before exploring, explain to your child that we never touch, pick, or taste unknown plants, berries, or mushrooms. Teach them to only touch plants the adult has identified as safe.

Teaches personal safety and foundational respect for potentially poisonous or protected plants in the environment.

Plant as a Friend: Talk about how plants help us—they give us food, provide shade, and make the air fresh. Have your child gently "pat" a plant or tree and thank it for its gifts.

Fosters empathy and a positive, caring relationship with the natural world.





PLANT DISCOVERY CHALLENGE | *What's growing?*

FOR THIS ADVENTURE, GET ACQUAINTED WITH UTAH'S PLANTS

Plants play a vital role in Utah's varied landscapes. From gardening to admiring Utah's giant trees to relaxing in your neighborhood's green spaces, we hope you enjoy discovering the plants in your area.

Identify Plants - Use a guidebook or plant identification app to learn about the plants in your neighborhood. This app can help you identify plants: [Seek](#).

Visit [Utah's National Champions](#)- This list contains some of Utah's largest trees. Make sure the ones you visit are on public land.

Shop Local - Visit a local farmers market or join a [Community Supported Agriculture](#) group to get fresh, local produce. Find a fruit or vegetable you haven't eaten before and explore some new recipes!

Plant a Garden - There are many resources available for beginning to advanced gardeners. Check out these [USU Extension pages](#) about gardening to help you get started.

Get to Know Your Local Plants - What native plants live in your area? Resources like the [Utah Native Plant Society](#) can help you identify local plants native to Utah.

Protect Utah from Invasive Species - Join the fight against invasive plants in Utah. Find a local event (State Parks often host these) where you can help remove invasive plants from your area.

Plant Native Species - Native plants are adapted to local climates and soils, requiring less water and maintenance. They provide essential habitat and food for local wildlife including birds, insects, and pollinators.

Visit Pando - Did you know that the heaviest and largest tree lives in Utah? The Pando Aspen Clone weighs 13 million pounds and consists of 40,000 aspen trees born from a single seed.

Visit your Local State or National Park - Utah is home to many majestic state and national parks. Remember, 4th-grade students get a free pass to all federal lands and waters.

Create a Planter - Upcycle used plastic food containers (like yogurt, cottage cheese, or to-go cups). Poke a few holes in the bottom, fill with dirt, and plant a seed(s). Place in an area with lots of sunlight, provide the appropriate amount of water, and watch the plant grow!

Visit a Botanical Garden or Nature Preserve - Local botanical gardens and nature preserves are the best places to learn about native plants! Research locations close to home and embark on an adventure to witness thriving greenery. Good to know: Many locations offer free or discounted admittance for families who receive SNAP EBT.

TAKE IT UP A NOTCH!

Grow Something New! - Are you an avid gardener, ready for a challenge? Try growing a plant you haven't grown before.

Spread the Word - There are several invasive plant species in Utah. Research one, and then spread the word to your school or neighborhood.





Nature Mandala - A mandala is a design used for contemplation or meditation. In the autumn, many plants drop leaves, seeds, pinecones, and flowers. Investigate your yard, a park, or a hiking trail, and search the ground for plant pieces that catch your eye. Arrange your treasures on the dirt or grass to create a pattern or design made from organic material.

Garden Bouquet - Gather flowers from your yard, deck, or balcony garden to create a beautiful bouquet for yourself or as a gift. Stewardship Tip: Please refrain from picking wildflowers. Removing them from the mountains means they don't have an opportunity to reproduce, wildlife loses them as a source of food, and the scenery for other recreators diminishes. If you don't have any flowers growing at your house, visit a U-Pick farm.

Root, Stem, Leaf, Flower, and Seed - Learn how to distinguish parts of a plant and how each part functions for its overall success. Choose a plant to draw and label each part of the plant.

Preserve - Typical forms of preservation include drying, canning, and salting. Gather herbs or produce and decide the best preservation technique.

Seed Saving - Harvesting, drying, and saving seeds is an ancient practice that can keep gardening costs low and adds another layer of connection to the garden.

Apothecary - Many medicines come from flowers, plants, and trees, and you can grow herbs to use as natural remedies in food or tea. Here are a few examples that grow well in Utah's arid environment and ways to use them - mint for an upset stomach, chamomile to relax, rose petals for self-love, and echinacea root for an immune system boost. Ensure any herbs you grow are safe for consumption by purchasing from a garden center or cross-referencing identification sources.

Join a Community Garden - Community gardens are shared spaces where individuals or families tend to different garden sections. Some are free to join, while others may charge a fee to rent a plot. Find a garden near you and enjoy the satisfaction of growing your food!

Visit a Botanical Garden or Nature Preserve - Local botanical gardens and nature preserves are the best places to learn about native plants! Research locations close to home and embark on an adventure to witness thriving greenery. Good to know: Many locations offer free or discounted admittance for families who receive SNAP EBT.

Cornucopia - A cornucopia is a horn-shaped object overflowing with freshly harvested food. Try building your own cornucopia. Find a basket, cardboard box, or any other container and fill it with items harvested from your garden, the farmers market, a U-Pick farm, or treasures found while exploring the outdoors. Arrange the harvest as an artistic expression of abundance.

Share the Abundance - If you grew produce, share it with neighbors, family, and friends! Also consider community programs where home gardeners can bring in extra produce to provide food for families in need.

