here are few simple pleasures that compare to eating something fresh from the garden. The satisfaction deepens if it’s the result of your own labor. The act of sowing seeds, troweling a garden bed, watering and fertilizing is an annual rite many consider therapeutic and rewarding. If you’re looking for a fun project the whole family can take part in, try planting American’s oldest and most beloved snack food—popcorn!

As spring gets fully underway and hands itch to get back in the dirt, plot out a little space in the garden for your children to work. With school soon coming to an end, now is the perfect time to get your children involved and teach them a little something about science, agriculture and nature while having fun. By starting your plants indoors you’ll be able to watch the kernels sprout and grow. It’s simple and will give your children a project they can sink their teeth into...butter and salt optional!

**How To Grow Popcorn:**

You’ll need popcorn kernels which can be purchased from most seed catalogs for home gardeners. You might also have luck growing popcorn from your local supermarket, but pick the plain popcorn kernels; microwave popcorn will not work. You’ll also need a plastic bag or glass jar, paper towels, water and soil.

Soak a few paper towels in water and place them in a plastic bag or glass jar. Then place a few kernels in the bag or jar so they sit on top of the paper towels. Place the bag/jar where it can get plenty of sunlight—at least 6 hours a day—and where it can be kept reasonably warm at all times.

The kernels should sprout and grow over the next few weeks. If the towels get too dry, water them again. Once you see the popcorn seeds sprouting, plant them in a pot with soil. Keep the soil moist.

Once all threat of late spring frosts is gone and the soil is thoroughly warmed you can transplant your seedlings to the garden (wait at least 10-14 days after the last spring frost). The popcorn kernels will need roughly 90 days to mature. Since popcorn can cross-pollinate with other varieties of corn (sweet and field) care must be taken to plant them far enough apart, either by physical space or time of plantings. Corn varieties should be planted 250 feet apart or, for those of us with normal size gardens, plant them at least 14 days apart.

Leave popcorn in the garden until the stalks and husks are brown and dry. When you can no longer leave a mark on the kernel with your fingernail, it’s time to harvest. Twist and snap each ear from the stalk. Do this before the frost hits. To prepare popcorn for indoor curing, carefully strip away the dried husk from each ear. The kernels will be partially dried or "cured," a necessity for long-term storage.

Besides drying on the stalks, popcorn requires another four to six weeks of thorough drying in a warm, well-ventilated place.

Place the ears in mesh bags or spread them out in an area where they’ll have warm air circulating around them. You can also hang mesh bags full of popcorn ears in your garage for about four weeks. After curing, hang the bags of corn in a cool, dry place. The corn can keep for years in the cool, dry, dark conditions.

After a month of curing, the kernels can be taken off the ears and stored in airtight jars. Whether you’re removing the kernels before storage or just before popping, there’s no real trick to it. Simply grasp the ear firmly in both hands and twist until the kernels drop out.

**Finally, Popcorn!**

Now that you’ve harvested the fruits of your labor, trying popping your homegrown popcorn on the stovetop for another great sensory experience. Top with one of your favorite toppings or enjoy fresh out of the pan. For great recipe ideas visit [www.popcorn.org](http://www.popcorn.org).

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**Good Times are Poppin’ in the Garden**

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For more great popcorn recipes, visit [www.popcorn.org](http://www.popcorn.org).