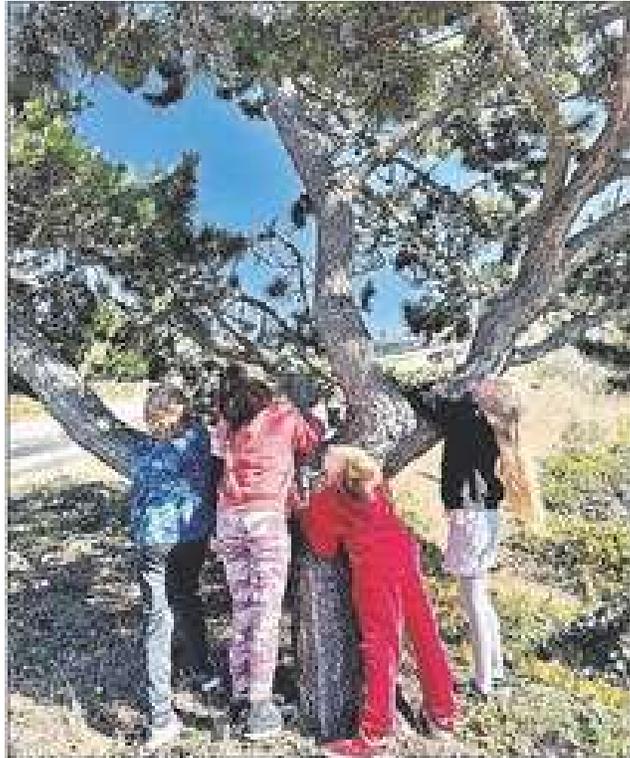


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## ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

Fun activities to teach kids about trees' importance



Master Gardener Sue Lovelace encourages her grandchildren to hug a tree. SUE LOVELACE

**Question: As a concerned parent of three children, I want them to respect nature and work with it to combat climate change. What are steps we can take to accomplish this?**

Answer: Working with nature to better prepare children for climate change is a wise idea. Why not start with trees, the superstars in our environment? Children can experience the shade of trees on a warm day, pick up fallen leaves in autumn or climb a tree to explore its height and leafy limbs. Educating youth on the many functions provided by trees teaches them to be better stewards of our natural world.

Trees truly are amazing. They absorb carbon dioxide from the air and release it as oxygen for us to breathe. They use carbon to build trunks, leaves and branches and to feed roots and fungi in the soil. The storage of carbon in trees reduces the amount of carbon dioxide in the air.

Trees provide us with food and shade, and forested watersheds filter our water supply. Trees can help reduce air pollution and noise from our highways while providing a vital habitat for wildlife.

Spending time among trees can boost our mental and physical health.

Many activities can enhance children's awareness of trees and teach them what they do for our environment. First, encourage your children to get up close to trees, either on your property or in public areas. Giving a tree a big hug is entirely appropriate to show appreciation for the wonderful things they do. Involve your children in tree planting on your property or in community tree-planting projects.

Next, visit a public park or protected forest to examine how trees change the climate they're in. Encourage your children to stand under tree limbs and compare the cool shade to the warmth of the sun. How do trees cool homes, sidewalks or paths? What would these areas be like if trees were not there?

Areas around trees in a protected forest may be fenced off to the public. Use these examples to explain to your children how the soil under a tree is compacted by foot traffic, destroying the vital life of microbes and other living bodies in and around the tree's trunk and roots.

Most children of all ages enjoy creating journals to record observations or draw the nature around them. One page can feature poems or stories of certain trees and the creatures that live in them. After visiting conifer forests, oak woodlands and public parks, get kids to note and draw the differences in the kinds of trees. Teaching kids to identify leaves also can be fun. They can sketch them, make rubbings or take samples and paste them in their journals.

"Tree cookies" are horizontal cuts of trunks and branches. The rings in these cuts tell the tree's age. Little dark marks in the horizontal slices can indicate trauma to the tree, such as fire, injury or extreme drought. Encourage your children to draw their own tree cookies in their notebooks. Older kids can label the living parts of the trunks and branches, such as heartwood, xylem, cambium, phloem and bark. Younger kids can draw tree cookies and count the rings they draw to determine the age of their tree.

There are many educational wildlife websites, books and podcasts, for example from The National Wildlife Federation (Trees for Wildlife), Nature Conservancy (Six Ways Trees Benefit People) and Project Learning Tree. These offer programs and activities for kids of all ages.

Trees are great teachers. The lessons children of all ages, as well as adults, can learn from them will empower them in the march against climate change. We can think of trees as strong allies that give us hope for the future. Encourage your children to do their part.

For a list of local places to visit with kids to explore trees, go to <https://bit.ly/3EkSWXY>.

A fun leaf-identifying activity for kids can be found at <https://bit.ly/3TShX2m>.

Activities for planting trees in Petaluma can be found at [releafpetaluma.org](http://releafpetaluma.org). Find a free oak tree coloring page at <https://bit.ly/3qgvovh>.

## **December garden**

Mulch! In winter, mulch helps reduce soil erosion and compaction by rain. Organic mulches such as wood chips, leaf litter, grass clippings, straw or compost break down slowly while adding nutrients to the soil and ultimately feeding plants. Mulch also helps suppress weeds.

Also, cover your existing compost pile with cardboard, burlap or tarp during heavy rains to avoid overly soggy compost. Too much water blocks out air, kills beneficial microbes and may cause unpleasant odors.

Clean out gutters to avoid overflow and to direct water to downspouts.

Plant rhubarb. Plant the roots (rhizomes) as soon as possible after purchasing or receiving divisions from a friend.

Feed the birds. Keep suet and seed feeders full. Be sure to clean and disinfect feeders every week to prevent diseases. Leave some spent flowers in your garden as a natural bird feeder.

Lightly fertilize potted winter-growing succulents such as Aeonium, aloe and Kalanchoe, if needed. Take cuttings of succulents and create small container gardens for holiday gifts.

Reduce water to houseplants over the winter, when they are not actively growing, to avoid root rot. Ensure they are not exposed to heat sources.

*Contributors to this week's column were Sue Lovelace, Joy Lanzendorfer, Rob Williams and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County ([sonomamg.ucanr.edu](http://sonomamg.ucanr.edu)) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to [scmqpd@gmail.com](mailto:scmqpd@gmail.com).*