

Oh, boy. Sunflower tunnels!

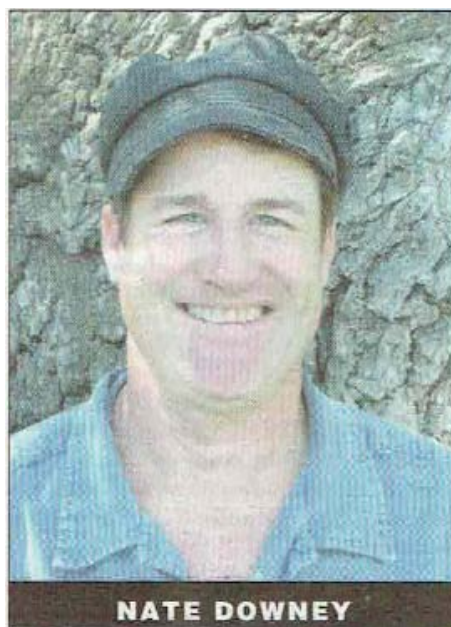
Given New Mexico's struggling public education system, many parents want new methods for teaching their children. One effective place to learn, your own backyard, is often overlooked. With a little forethought and the application of some inexpensive child-oriented features, you can create a modest wonderland that doubles as a multifunctional learning center.

The simplest kid-friendly garden feature is the "sunflower tunnel." Made up of two rows of sunflowers tied together on top, sunflower tunnels take up significant space and must be situated in a sunny part of your property. Put your tunnel in a convenient location, so you and your kids remember to water, enjoy, and learn from it.

If possible, plant sunflowers in healthy soil or in slight depressions where they can absorb runoff. Wind protection can also be a critical factor in establishing a successful tunnel, and it is helpful if your rows are lined up on level ground.

But where are the level parts of your landscape? Where is your garden's healthiest soil? Where does your land get at least six hours of sunlight? Where is it wet after a rain? Where do winds rip through? The answers to all of these questions require observation, the starting place of science, but they also imply a need for measurement, experimentation, analysis, and discovery. Bring children into the landscape-design process and they become scientists with a positive purpose and designers with clear reasoning behind the artistic choices they make.

One important aspect of learning in this hands-on way is that the experience can be much more memorable due to its relevance. When kids obtain data because a teacher or textbook tells it to them, this can be dull. When kids obtain the same data in order to create a fun place to play, it could be an unforgettable experience.



Like the day-in and day-out work of rehearsing for a school play, your sunflower tunnel will demand attention. From watering and weeding to scratching compost into the soil and supporting floppy flowers with tall stakes, a sunflower tunnel teaches patience as it passes on an important life lesson: Benefits come from dedication to your work.

When cold sets in, your sunflower tunnel will wilt, and it will be time to step back and take in the magic spot you created. Perhaps while nibbling on sunflower seeds or while harvesting them for roasting later, you and the children working with you just might feel the rush that every successful artist or craftsman feels after a mere inspiration is brought forth to fruition.

The essential practical lesson of a sunflower tunnel is that hard work and energy go into the food we eat, but in the end nature will do many things for us as long as we let her. In the midst of playing in and around the tunnel, by harvest time most children will learn the many ways in which sunflowers are useful in the garden. As they create diverse microclimates in the neighborhood, they also provide food for migratory birds, and find satisfaction in their bellies in the form of a healthy snack.

*Nate Downey is president of Santa Fe Permaculture (505-424-4444) and the author of the 2010 book, *Harvest the Rain: How to Enrich Your Life by Seeing Every Storm as a Resource* (Sunstone Press).*