
**Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 77
Growing Young Gardeners Through Winter
Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/77**

Theresa: This is the Living Homegrown podcast episode number 77.

Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown podcast where it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host national PBS TV producer and canning expert Theresa Loe.

Theresa: Hey there everybody, welcome to the Living Homegrown podcast. I'm your host Theresa Loe. This podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm and that can mean preserving, fermenting, small space food growing and just taking small steps towards living a more sustainable lifestyle. Many different ways that we can live closer to our food even if we have little or no garden space at all. If you want to dive into any of these topics or learn about my online canning academy, just visit my website livinghomegrown.com.

Today's episode is about growing young gardeners even during the winter months. Now, what do I mean by that? What do I mean by growing young gardeners? Well, I'm talking about turning our kids on into being gardeners themselves or being connected to nature somehow. I just feel it's such an important topic and I have never really covered it here on the podcast but I'm a really big proponent of getting kids to get their hands dirty out in the garden and to be connected to nature in multiple ways.

The reason why I'm talking about it now is because most people don't think about this type of topic during winter time. The garden shut down. A lot of people even have their gardens completely covered in snow. I live in Los Angeles, so our garden is still going but it's not really typically something that you think about during the winter months which is when you are not usually planting your garden. It's not a typical topic. However, here at our house when my kids were younger and through their whole life we garden year round not outside but inside during the winter months.

I always, always ever since my kids were tiny, tiny, we always had something growing on our kitchen table. If you were to come over to my house any time during the year we still do always have something growing on our kitchen table. It's always some sort of a project. I'm just that way that I love to have nature all over the house and having it at the kitchen table was really fun

because it really connected with the kids when they maybe weren't going outside as much due to the weather. What I'm going to be talking about in today's episode is just some ideas that you might want to do with your kids or your grandkids or even just yourself in order to keep everyone connected to nature all through the winter months.

Now, these are really simple things that you can grow with your kids or do with your kids or just do for your own personal enjoyment on your kitchen table so that you have a little bit of nature going all the time and you still feel connected to it. Now there's a lot of things that you can grow on your kitchen table that work for this, work during the winter months. I'm not going to cover all of them because I've been doing this for years and years and I have a long list of things that we could talk about.

What I'm going to specifically focus on today is about forcing bulbs during the winter months. I'm also going to talk about growing wheat grass not just for juicing if you want to do that, that's great but I like to grow wheat grass with children because it grows really fast and they get to cut it down with a pair of scissors, they get to give it a haircut and they get a lot, it's a lot of fun. They get their hands in there and they get to play with it and feel it and have the enjoyment of something green. We're going to talk about that and we're also going to talk about growing mushrooms. Just briefly I'll give you a little premier on how you do that.

Another thing that I just wanted to mention that I won't cover today but I will cover in another podcast is growing microgreens. It is a really simple way to be growing something edible during the winter months and it's fun to do for yourself or with your kids but I will cover that in another podcast but it is something to consider if you're looking for something to grow that's edible. You can definitely grow microgreens with your kids. It's something you can grow for any age and they grow very quickly, so kids get a lot of enjoyment out of it.

Before I go into how to do the forcing of the bulbs and the growing of the wheat and the growing of the mushrooms, let me just first talk really briefly about why I think it's so important to grow things with your kids. It has a lot of benefits and I think most of you probably know most of these or you wouldn't probably even be listening to this podcast because you probably are gardeners yourself or you want to be a gardener so you understand the benefits of having your hands in the dirt.

Some of the things that can really be beneficial for kids when you're gardening with them or you're working with them learning how to grow things is that it brings them closer to nature especially in the wintertime when they don't get to play outside as much as they normally do. In today's

day and age it is just so easy for our kids to be connected to the Internet, to their phones 24/7 and it's so easy for them to lose touch with nature. With video games and television being so addictive it's just really important that we draw them away from that and we make sure to include nature in their lives whether it's in outdoor play or in indoor or outdoor gardening projects so that they stay connected to that. So many kids today don't even understand where their food comes from.

I know my listeners are very in tune with that and that so many of you send me pictures of things that you're growing in your gardens and how your kids are part of that and that's awesome. It's really important that you share that with other kids in the neighborhood or with the schools because a lot of kids just do not have that connection. It's just so important on so many levels because connecting kids with nature gives them empathy for nature. If they understand it they're more likely to preserve it and care about it. By doing this we're creating environmental stewards for the future.

It's also so much better for their brains. It lets them be more creative. It encourages creative thinking. It's also a form of stress relief which you know if you're a gardener that getting out there in nature totally tones down the hustle bustle of our very, very busy lives. Kids also find gardening so fascinating. It's science and it's a way to turn them on to science. I have two sons but I feel it is even more important to induce a love of science in daughters because I grew up in a household where science was just part of everything that we did.

I had two older brothers. My father was an engineer, both my brothers became engineers and I went to school to become an engineer and I have to tell you I was usually the only woman in the class. Most women are not encouraged to go into science and although it's so much better today than it was when I was in school I still feel that a lot of girls are not getting that encouragement that going into science is just as cool for a girl to do as it is for a boy to be in science. Because although it has changed a lot today from when I was in school I still feel that a lot of girls are not encouraged to go into science and math and all of that because they're intimidated.

By having a fascination with growing things and understanding the science of it when they're very, very young, it gives them more confidence as they get older to not be afraid of those things. I really encourage you if you have daughters to totally immerse them in the science half of gardening so that they'll be so excited about how things are working because they start out that way but something along the way in our society just makes them feel more intimidated. We want to eliminate that intimidation as much as possible.

The other thing that gardening teaches our kids is responsibility. It's just as important for them to take care of a pet and learn responsibility that way as it is for them to take care of a plant. Sometimes taking care of a plant or a garden is a better first step before they get to the part where they're taking care of animals but having that responsibility gives them a sense of accomplishment and makes them feel more grown up and it can really instill them being able to think for themselves and take care of things all by themselves because they learn the routine as they're much, much younger.

Now you've probably already heard of the book *Last Child in the Woods*. This is a fantastic book all about how it's important for us to save our children from nature deficit disorder. Which is kids not having enough time outdoors, not having a connection with nature and the natural world. If you're at all interested in this topic I highly recommend that book. I have several other books that I can recommend to you if you really want to get your kids into different gardening projects and kind of turn them on to the fun of gardening in really creative ways.

In fact, I can tell you right now that any book by Sharon Lovejoy would be a perfect companion for you both in the wintertime and in the summer time. She is a fantastic author. She has several books out. One of my favorites is one of her first books called *Sunflower Houses* but she has several books out there and they're all related to the sheer enjoyment that you can get out of a garden in really whimsical ways. She's someone who was a mentor to me when I was in my 20's and I was first learning how to be a garden writer and she has gone on to create some of the most beautiful and whimsical garden books. They're both whimsical for both adults and for children. She is very beloved by adults and kids alike.

I will have in the show notes for this episode, I will have a whole list of some really cool garden related books for children both for the parents and for the kids. If you want to go to the get to the show notes just go to livinghomegrown.com/77 and I'll have a whole list there for you. I have some really good ones that will get you started in a whole lot of different ways. Let's go into what are some of the things that you can do on your kitchen table during the winter months to keep your kids connected to nature. The first one I'm going to talk about is about forcing bulbs.

Now right now it is November and this is a great time to do bulb forcing. If you start right now you could have blooms by Christmas time. There are two bulbs that I would recommend for forcing right now and that is Paperwhites and Amaryllis. Now, the reason I suggest those two for forcing is because they don't require a cooling down period. They don't have to be put in the refrigerator for a few weeks in order to get flowers. You can just pick them up at your local nursery or your home improvement center and you can do the

forcing right now and they will just go straight into growing green leaves and then blooming right away.

Now the reason that I recommend these to grow now is because it is really magical. The way they turn from a bulb into a plant and it's all done out in the open where your kids get to watch it. It's fascinating for someone from three or four years old all the way up to a teenager. My boys are teenagers and they still really get a kick out of watching the flowers open up as they're sitting at our kitchen table. We talk about it you know like, "Oh my gosh, look at this. It's opening up." It's just ... I know it sounds silly but it is really fascinating to watch.

Hidden inside every one of these bulbs is the perfect embryo of a plant just waiting to emerge or escape. It has the leaf, the stem, the petal, the flower, everything that is going to become that plant is inside that bulb. Amazingly it also contains all the nourishment that it needs to grow into that flower. You don't have to fertilize it in order to get it to turn into this plant and this flower. All you have to do to force or coax that bulb into bloom is to do a little trickery to make it think that spring has arrived. To do that you just need some light, some water and warm temperature which it will be inside your house. You don't have to heat up the bulb but just having the room temperature will make it think that it's spring time.

Now, if you've never done this before you'll be surprised how easy it is. It doesn't matter if you do Paperwhites, Paperwhite Narcissus is what I'm talking about when I say Paperwhite or Amaryllis bulbs. They both work equally well. I'll tell you a little trick with Paperwhites. They tend to get very tall and lanky with their leaves and they can sometimes flop over. I'll talk to you in a minute about how you can prevent that from happening. First let me just tell you how you do it.

Now if you want to you can actually plant these bulbs in dirt or in soil in a pot and have that sitting on the kitchen table but what I recommend that you do is that you get a clear glass container. It can be something that would normally be used for flower arranging or any kind of clear glass bowl where you can see through it. The reason I say that is because it allows the kids to see the root system that forms. It's just as fascinating under the water level as it is above the water level. I like to use clear glass containers and then I fill those containers with either gravel or pebbles or you can use clear glass beads or even like aquarium rocks.

You're going to fill the container about two thirds full of the gravel or pebbles that you have. Then you're going to set into the container as many Paperwhite bulbs as they can comfortably fit without them being too crunched. They can be just barely touching or you can have a little space

between them. If you're doing an Amaryllis bulb you would just put one bulb in each one of your containers. You place them with the pointy side up because that's where the plant is going to come out. Then you're going to add more gravel or pebbles around the bulb about halfway up just to hold it. It kind of anchors it in place.

Then you're going to add water to that container so it's just barely touching the bottom of the bulb. You don't want to submerge the bulb in water where they could rot. You're just getting it so it's just touching the bulb with water. It just takes about a week and you will start to see some roots start to reach down into the water. You'll check it every day or so or every few days and make sure that the water is still just touching the bottom of the bulb. That's another reason why it's nice to use the clear glass container.

Now for the first three weeks or so you're going to keep the bulbs in a low light area. That's just so that the bulbs will focus on just making the roots but as soon as you have some roots developing then you can move them to a really brightly lit area like on your kitchen table and that's when you start watching for the flowers to appear. Now if we're talking about paperwhites they'll first reach out with some green leaves and then a second stem will come out from the center and it will be the white flowers. On an Amaryllis bulb you have very large green leaves and a very, very thick stem will come out that has the Amaryllis flower.

Now, as I said one of the problems or one of the downsides of the paperwhites is they grow very, very fast which is an advantage but sometimes they grow so fast that the greenery, the leaves come shooting up a foot or more and then they flop over and it gets hard to keep them from tipping over inside your gravel. What you can do is you can stunt their growth a little bit and they will only grow about half of that height. Maybe only six to eight inches instead of a foot to 14 inches. How do you stunt their growth? Well, you can do it with alcohol. I know that sounds weird but it totally works. You just have to do this yourself. You don't want your kids to do it obviously.

What I like to use is like vodka or gin and you're basically going to make the bulbs a little tipsy and just enough to stunt their growth but not enough that you hurt or damage the bulbs. Now, although I like to use vodka usually for this you can also use rubbing alcohol. A 70% isopropyl alcohol will work. However, one year I did an experiment and I did several different groups of paperwhites. In one group I didn't do anything and I just let them grow. They ended up growing about 12 to 16 inches tall and they flopped over.

The other group I used rubbing alcohol, 70% that it's the bottle says 70% alcohol on it. I used a solution of that which I'll give you the formula for in a second. It did stunt their growth but you had to be careful because the

alcohol did tend to make the tips of the bulb leaves turn a little yellow. The third group I used gin and I used 80 proof distilled gin and I also tried it with vodka. I used the formulation for that to get the right mixture and that stunted the growth but did not yellow the leaves. Of the three different methods using nothing, using rubbing alcohol or using gin or vodka, I found that the distilled spirit, the gin or vodka worked the best.

How much do you need? Well, what you need is to have a solution that adds 5% alcohol to the water that you're going to be using. Now, if you use a higher concentration you'll end up killing the plant. You have to be careful. You only want to have 5% alcohol. If you're going to use a let's say 80 proof gin or 80 proof vodka then here's the way you would get 5%. You would mix up in a bowl or in a measuring cup. You would mix up one part gin or vodka and seven parts water and you would end up with about a 5% solution. That's what I did.

You could do this as simply as taking a shot glass and taking a shot of vodka and putting it into your measuring cup and then putting in seven shots of water and there you have your 5% solution. Use that to water your bulbs and it will stunt the growth but they still flower and they still do really well. It also tends to cut down on the bacteria level in the water. Though I find that the root system does a pretty good job of that all on its own. Now, if you wanted to use rubbing alcohol then you'd want to use a rubbing alcohol that says 70% on the bottle and you would mix that by making a solution of one part rubbing alcohol with 10 to 11 parts water.

I know you might be confused like, "Oh, wait a minute, 80 proof and 70%." I know it gets confusing. Just remember this, 80 proof means that it's 40% alcohol. That's why you're using a different formulation. I will have all of this in the show notes. You don't have to try and write it down. You can go to the show notes for this episode and I will have a link to an entire blog post on how to do this and it does have the formula in the blog post. You can just go there when you're ready to do this and it tells you how to mix it up. Do remember the show notes are at livinghomegrown.com/77.

Now, if you're growing an Amaryllis bulb, all you do is put it into the gravel, have the water level just touching and that's it. You don't have to add anything to the water. You don't have to worry about it tipping over. They're quite large bulbs and they tend to really anchor themselves super well in making a root system in those pebbles. You don't have any problem. You don't have to add any alcohol to an Amaryllis bulb.

Now, there's lots of other bulbs that you can force but most of those bulbs need to have a chill down period before they will bloom properly. That's why I'm suggesting you do Paperwhites or Amaryllis with your kids. Once you have this the roots growing and it's starting to come up with the leaves then I set it

on the kitchen table or someplace where they'll get to see it every day because some days it grows a couple inches in a day. That's really fascinating and they get a big kick out of it.

The second thing that you can have growing on your kitchen table through the winter months is to grow wheat grass. Now you can grow wheat grass to use in your juicer, to get wheat grass juice if you want to have that. I have always grown wheat grass at Easter time so that my kids could have an Easter basket of real grass growing on the kitchen table. It's also fun to do during the winter months because it's super easy and super fast. My kids always grew the wheat grass and then they were setting dinosaurs in there or their Lego's or whatever as it was on the kitchen table and they changed it up every week. They got a ... It was like a jungle. They got a lot of enjoyment out of it but if you want to grow this and then actually juice it, you can do that too.

What I like to use to grow this is just wheat grass seed that I buy at the health food store. That way I can get organic seeds that I'm sure haven't been treated or sprayed with anything. I usually buy winter wheat or something called wheat berries. They just come in little packages and you can get them at the health food store. You bring that home and what you're going to want to do is do a soaking process so that they start sprouting before you even plant them. Before you start soaking them you're also going to need a container to grow in.

Now, because this is going to be sitting on the kitchen table you want a container that does not have a drainage hole. It can be anything from a casserole dish to an empty flower arrangement vase that's very shallow or you could use a plastic tray if you had like maybe a food tray that you brought home from a restaurant. You can use those. Anything like that that's small and shallow, just a couple inches tall but you do not want to have drainage holes if you're going to have it sitting on your kitchen table.

Let's say for this project you have an eight by eight square casserole dish that you're going to use to have on your table. Then you're also going to need some organic potting soil. Again you can get that at the nursery or you can get it at your home improvement center. Once you have your seeds, your soil and your container then you're ready to start. This is something that your kids can participate in. Remember, when I'm talking about all these projects your kids are doing this with you. You take about, for an eight by eight container you would take about a cup of wheat grass seeds and you would soak those seeds overnight in a bowl of water.

You just pour them into a bowl, you cover them with water, so there's maybe like an inch of water over the seeds and you let them set overnight and then in the morning you pour that into a sieve or into a strainer so that you're draining out all of the water and then you put them back into the bowl and

you fill the bowl with water again in that morning and you let them soak all day and you drain again that night. You repeat this until the seeds have actually soaked for three soaks, all right? You did at morning, they soak all day. You did at night, they soaked all night. You did at morning, they soaked all day. You want them to have at least three good soaks. At this time the seeds should start sprouting.

The second that you see the seed splitting and starting to sprout, then you're ready to plant them. You take your container, your casserole dish or whatever it is that you're going to use and you add in an inch to two inches of organic potting soil. Then you're going to take a spray bottle and you're going to wet down that soil. I don't pour water in because you have to remember there's no drainage holes and you don't want this so filled with water that it's waterlogged. Using a spray bottle allows you to kind of control and making an even layer of water through the whole thing. You want to get the soil really good and moist. Keep moistening it until you can stick your finger down in there and it's moist all the way down but it's not filled with water.

Then you take your seeds and you spread them across the soil in a really even layer. As evenly as you can. It doesn't have to be perfect. You don't have to worry about it being perfect and then you take just another handful of soil and you sprinkle that on top and that kind of whole covers the seeds and maybe a quarter of an inch in soil and you pat it down gently. You don't want to squish them and you give it another good sprain so that that top layer is moist. Now at this point if you were to just leave it on your kitchen counter, that top layer gets dried out really quickly.

What I do is I lay a plain white moistened paper towel over the top just to keep everything wet or you can take a piece of plastic wrap and stretch that across the top to help hold in that moisture. Then what you're going to do is every day you're going to lift up that cover and have your kids spray down the soil to keep it moist. You have to keep the seeds moist in order for them to continue growing. Now what's cool about this is that it only takes a few days for those wheat seeds to start showing long, tall sprouts coming out of the soil. It's usually like three or four days for that to start happening. You'll start seeing those sprouts coming up through the soil and it's really exciting for the kids. They just find it fascinating because they saw them sprouted, they know what's going on under that dirt level.

Now, once the sprouts are about oh a quarter inch to a half inch tall then you can take off that cover and just work by watering in the morning and in the evening. Just keep those spray bottle and that tray of sprouts sitting in the middle of the kitchen table so it's really easy to remember and whenever your kids want to they can give it a spray and make sure that everything is moistened down. Now, what happens is the wheat grass grows and it gets to be just a few inches tall and then each one of those little wheat grasses will

split into two leaves. Once it split it's at that point that it's actually mature and if you wanted to harvest it in order to make juice from it, you could do it at that point.

It's also at this point that I let the kids start giving the grass a haircut. This is really fun for them. It doesn't matter what age they are. You can use children size scissors or if they're older they can use regular scissors and they can give the grass a haircut. They can mow it. Also at this point we start sticking things in there like dinosaurs and trucks and little Lego men or fairies or whatever it is that your kids would want to add to it and make it like it's own little world that they have growing there on the kitchen table. It's a lot of fun for them. My kids had a blast with ...

As things would start growing and the dinosaurs would start getting covered up, it was like Jurassic park. Then they would cut down the grass so that the dinosaur could see again and then they'd watch and each day this grass is growing taller and it would get taller than the dinosaur and then they'd cut it down. This can go on actually for several weeks before the grass starts to use up all the nutrients that are in the soil and they start not bouncing back as well. I've had grass baskets that I've had during Easter time. I've had them last up to two months but usually after about a month or after about five weeks they start to go downhill.

At that point you can take the entire thing and you can put it in the compost or what I do is I give it to my chickens and they absolutely go nuts for it. The kids have several weeks of fun with the grass and all they have to do is just keep trimming it and it just bounces back and bounces back. It's a pretty easy project, low investment, a lot of fun and if they want to they can dump that out and do another batch. One more thing I would say about growing wheat grass is if you want your kids to actually experience the entire process not covering it up with dirt so that they can see how everything sprouts from that seed, you can do a little mini project by taking just a plate and putting a wet paper towel on the plate and placing some of those sprouted seeds on the wet paper towel and moistening that alongside with your little garden that you're creating.

You can have a plate going at the same time but not cover it up with any soil and they can watch the whole process because the moistened paper towel will keep the seeds wet enough that they will sprout right there before their eyes. I always would do some of those on the side at the same time so they could see what was happening under the dirt level. It's a lot of fun. It's very sciencey, they'll love it. Now the last thing that I would suggest for a winter project for right now would be to grow some mushrooms. It is super duper easy to grow mushrooms on your kitchen counter or on your kitchen table.

The thing with mushrooms though is that I had a lot of talks with my kids about safe mushrooms and not safe mushrooms. Because the one thing you don't want to do is confuse your kid as to thinking that all mushrooms are safe to eat so that if they ever saw mushrooms out in the garden or out in the woods, they need to know that they can't eat those. There are so many poisonous mushrooms out there. I actually didn't start growing mushrooms with my kids until they were older. They were probably 10 and up before we actually started growing mushrooms on the kitchen counter because I wanted them to fully understand what we were doing and the safety requirements of mushrooms and they would never ever pick a mushroom out in the wild.

In fact, I probably had done such a good job of scaring them about the mushrooms that the first time we ever grew mushrooms, they didn't want to taste them. That was a weird experience because every time we've ever grown anything they were always very anxious to eat whatever were growing. When we grew carrots out in the garden or potatoes or broccoli. Anything that we grew because they grew it they couldn't wait to eat it but mushrooms they definitely look a little creepy when they're growing on the table which they found fascinating but they were a little leery of tasting them. I think it might have also been because when we were out on hikes and we would see mushrooms, we knew or they knew not to taste a mushroom out in the wild unless we were with someone that knew what they were doing. They were a little leery.

However, I still recommend doing it because it is absolutely fascinating to watch the mushrooms sprout. I will have links in the show notes for where you can get mushroom kits that will grow right on your kitchen counter or on your kitchen table. A mushroom kit will cost you about \$25 and you can grow all different kinds of mushrooms. Probably the most dramatic was when we did shiitake mushrooms because they were so huge and they just looked like creatures from outer space as they were coming out of the medium, the growing medium. What it is usually with these kits is it's just a plastic bag that is filled with a growing medium that's been inoculated with the particular mushroom that you're wanting to grow.

In our case with the shiitake mushrooms, as soon as you moisten the kit and you cover the top with a plastic bag or a tent to keep the moisture in then they immediately within just a few days start sprouting and the mushrooms will come out from the sides and it seriously looks like an alien or a creature from outer space. I had two boys that just thought that was the coolest thing ever and they were doing things like setting their Lego man on top of it. They had a lot of fun with it. I think it's a really fun project to do but that's seriously all you have to do. Is buy the kit and then follow the instructions and moisten it, cover it and they just start growing. Then you can just harvest those mushrooms and use them in your stir fry or whatever.

It was definitely a fun project but again I don't recommend doing it with kids that are too small because you don't want them to get confused and then later think that any mushroom they find outside is perfectly safe to eat because it's not. That's the only warning I would give about that. That's it for the three different projects that I would do during the winter months with your kids. I really hope that it's something that you will try because honestly the kids don't get outside as much during the winter months and this is such a great way to keep them connected to nature. It keeps them curious. They learn while they're watching these things grow. It gives you something to talk about while you're sitting at the table. They learn how a seed works. They get to watch it up close and personal.

For me having something growing on our kitchen table 24/7 year round has always made my kids more interested in science and more interested in gardening. I couldn't recommend it enough. Now remember that everything that I talked about will be in the show notes for this episode. You can get that at livinghomegrown.com/77 and I will include links to the post on how to do the forcing of the bulbs as well as where you can get the mushroom kits and even an instruction list for how you can do wheat grass on your countertop. Thanks so much for joining me. I'm really glad you were here and I hope that as we're getting into winter you might try one of these projects. I appreciate the time that you took to be here today and until next time just try to live a little more local, seasonal and homegrown. Take care.

Speaker 2: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown podcast.