NINA DOS RIOS

SOPHIA'S SECRET GARDEN



TEACHER'S GUIDE

About This Guide

Sophia's Secret Garden — Readability

Original Spache Readability Formula	Revised Spache Readability Formula
Score: 3.59 Reading Difficulty: Easy Grade Level: Fourth Grade Age Range: 9-10	Revised Score: 3.18 Reading Difficulty: Very Easy Grade Level: Third Grade Age Range: 8-9

Here's the story with words not on the Spache 3,000-word list in bold:

SOPHIA'S SECRET GARDEN by Nina Dos Rios

Sophia crossed the **backyard** one afternoon.

She had always thought the **space** behind the family **garage** was just full of **trash**. Broken **lawn** chairs and **cardboard boxes** were covered with **spiderwebs**. **Sophia** thought **spiders** were **interesting**, but a little **scary**.

It was a small **area** of ground. Tall **weeds** grew along the **wall**, and **patches** of **clover** covered the **soil**. It was a **mess**.

But **Sophia** saw a garden. It could be her secret place. **Sophia** walked back toward the house, thinking.

In the kitchen, she found a **sturdy soup spoon**. It was not a garden **tool**, but it would do. She **grabbed** a small **plastic bucket** from the **porch**. Then she **hurried** back before anyone could find her.

When she **cleared** away the **junk**, she found **pebbles** and pieces of glass. They **sparkled** in the sun like **hidden treasure**.

Then **Sophia knelt** on the hard **dirt**. She pushed the edge of the **spoon** into the earth, **prying** at the **base** of a thick, **stubborn dandelion**. She pushed, **twisted**, and pulled. The **roots** were long and strong.

Sophia wiped sweat from her **forehead** with the back of her hand. She felt proud of her hard work. She had not **asked** for **advice** or help.

Every time she threw **weeds** into her **bucket**, the ground looked a little more like her dream garden.

The first small **area** was ready. She imagined rows of bright **marigolds** and green beans climbing up the fence. She looked at her secret corner and promised not to show anyone until it was finished.

The next morning, **Sophia** moved toward the **garage**, as quiet as a cat. She **carried** a small **handful** of **dried marigold** seeds in her **pocket**.

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Her secret spot was still there, waiting for her. She had big plans for this **space**. **Sunflowers** would reach toward the **clouds**. For now, it was the **dirt** and the promise of what might grow.

She did not hear the **rustle** of leaves at first. Skip, the dog, had followed her. He **trotted** toward her. He was **wagging** his tail.

"Skip, wait!" **Jackson shouted**.

Sophia froze. The **bushes** parted. **Jackson** stood there, his **messy** hair **tangled** with leaves.

"**Sophia**?" **Jackson** stood still and looked at the **cleared patch** of **dirt**. Then he saw the **soup spoon** and **finally** his sister. **Jackson** was twelve and tall. She was only six.

"What is this?" he **asked**.

Sophia stood up and **wiped** her **dirty** hands on her **jeans**. She **expected teasing**.

He liked to build **models** out of **balsa** wood. He **usually** saw **dirt** as something to clean off. He never thought about **using** it to grow plants.

"It's mine," she said. "It's my garden. Don't tell **Mom** and Dad."

Jackson didn't laugh. He didn't call her silly for playing with **trash**.

Instead, he stepped **carefully** over a rock. He **knelt** down for a closer look.

"You're **using** a **soup spoon**?" he **asked**, picking up the bent **utensil** and smiling.

"It works," **Sophia** answered.

Jackson looked at the edges of the **patch**. "It's a good spot, I guess. The sun hits it most of the day. But when it rains, it is **going** to be a giant **puddle**."

Sophia asked, "What can I do?"

Jackson said, "I could make a raised bed. It would keep the **soil** in place."

He walked toward the corner, **measuring** it with his eyes.

"If we put **strings** on the fence, you could grow climbing beans," he **suggested**. "And we could paint a sign to say it is ours."

"You **really** want to help?" she **asked**.

Jackson looked at her. He reached down to scratch Skip behind the ears. "**Yeah**, I'm **bored**, **Sophia**. **Honestly**, this looks like more fun than my **video** games."

The two **kids spent** every day behind the **garage**. She cared for the plants. He used pieces of wood to hold the **soil** in their garden.

"It is **amazing**," **Sophia** whispered. "**God** put everything inside the seed. It just needs the **warmth** and water to start, and **sunlight** to grow big."

They watered the garden with an old **plastic** bottle.

"Are you sure you planted them deep enough?" **Jackson asked** on the third day. "Maybe they are too cold. Or maybe the **soil** is too hard."

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"Seeds do not grow **faster** because you watch them, **Jackson**," she **teased**. "They grow when they are ready. You have to give them time."

Days turned into a week. **Jackson** stopped visiting the garden and went back to playing his **video** games.

Sophia still visited. One morning, the ground was **soaked**. A **gentle** rain had **fallen overnight**. The garden smelled of wet earth.

Sophia walked out behind the **garage**. At first, she saw nothing in the **soil**. Then she saw it!

A tiny, green **arch** was pushing through the **crust** of the **dirt**.

"**Jackson**!" she **shouted**.

Jackson ran to her with Skip barking at his **heels**.

He **knelt** beside **Sophia**. His eyes **widened** as he **spotted** the tiny bit of green.

"It's **alive**," he said.

"It's not just a **sprout**," **Sophia** said. She pointed to the **delicate** first leaves. "We did it right! We gave it what it needed, and it grew."

Within days, their garden became a **patch** of green. Tiny leaves opened like **miniature umbrellas**.

Sophia and **Jackson spent** every **free** moment in the garden.

"Look at this one," **Sophia** whispered, pointing to a **sturdy** shoot. "It **doubled** in size **overnight**."

As the weeks passed, the garden grew.

"We can't hide it **anymore**," **Jackson** said. "The **sunflowers** are already **taller** than the fence. **Someone** is **going** to see them."

Sophia froze when she heard **Mom** say, "Do you know what those **kids** are up to?"

"They are together behind the **garage** all day, every day," Dad said.

Sophia stood up and looked at **Jackson**. They had been so careful. Now their **parents** had found their secret garden.

"**Sophia**? **Jackson**?" their mother **asked** as she looked at the **wooden planters**, the sign, and all the green plants. "What have you two been up to?"

Sophia said, "It started as a **mess** of **weeds**. I wanted a secret garden. **Jackson** helped me build the planter."

"You did this? All this?"

"Yes, we did," **Jackson** said. "It took a lot of work, and time, and water."

"You made a pretty garden," **Mom** said. "I'm so proud of how you two worked together."

Sophia smiled. Her secret garden was now a special place for the whole family **Someday**, they would **share** the **harvest**, too.

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Vocabulary List of Words and Simple Definitions

Use this list to pre-teach words before reading, or as a reference while reading. Grouped by type to make classroom pre-teaching easier.

Garden & Plants

soil	The top layer of earth where plants grow
weeds	Wild plants growing where they are not wanted
clover	A small green plant, usually with three round leaves
dandelion	A common plant with a yellow flower and long root
roots	Parts of a plant that grow underground and take in water
seeds	Small parts of a plant that can grow into new plants
marigolds	Garden flowers that are usually yellow, orange, or red
sunflowers	Tall plants with large yellow flowers
sprout	A new plant that has just begun to grow
shoot	A new stem or part of a plant growing upward
raised bed	A garden area with soil held above the surrounding ground
planter	A container or built area used for growing plants
harvest	Food or other crops gathered from plants after they grow

Places & Things

backyard	The area of land behind a house
garage	A building or part of a house where a car or other things are kept
lawn chair	A chair made for sitting outside
cardboard	Thick, stiff paper often used to make boxes
spiderweb	A web made by a spider
bucket	A container with a handle used for carrying things
porch	A covered or raised area outside the entrance to a house
pebbles	Small, smooth stones
utensil	A tool used for a particular job, especially in the kitchen
fence	A structure around or between areas of land
video games	Games played on a computer, television, or other electronic device

Actions (Verbs)

cleared	Removed things from an area (past tense)
prying	Using force to lift or pull something loose (continuous action)

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twisted	Turned something around (past tense)
wiped	Cleaned or dried something by rubbing it (past tense)
knelt	Went down onto one or both knees (past tense, irregular verb)
trotted	Moved at a quick, light pace (past tense)
wagging	Moving from side to side, especially a dog's tail (continuous action)
measuring	Finding or judging the size of something (continuous action)
planted	Put seeds or plants into the soil to grow (past tense)
doubled	Became twice as large (past tense)
whispered	Spoke very quietly (past tense)
shouted	Spoke very loudly (past tense)

Describing Things

sturdy	Strong and not easily broken
stubborn	Difficult to move, change, or remove
tangled	Twisted together in a messy way
soaked	Very wet
gentle	Soft or not strong
delicate	Small, light, or easily damaged
miniature	Very small; much smaller than usual

Other Useful Words

trash	Things that are no longer wanted and are thrown away
junk	Old or unwanted things
hidden	Kept where it cannot easily be seen
treasure	Something valuable or special
advice	An idea or suggestion about what someone should do
space	An area or place
patch	A small area of land
teasing	Making jokes about someone, sometimes to embarrass them
honestly	In a truthful way
crust	A hard layer on the outside or surface of something
alive	Living; not dead
proud	Pleased about something you or someone else has done

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American Culture Notes

These notes explain a few details about everyday American life that may be unfamiliar to some learners.

Backyards

Many American houses have a backyard, a private outdoor area behind the house. Families may use the backyard for playing, gardening, eating outdoors, or relaxing.

Garages

A garage is usually attached to a house or located nearby. It is designed for keeping cars, but families often also use garages to store tools, bicycles, garden supplies, boxes, and other household items.

In the story, the unused area behind the garage gives Sophia a place where she can start her garden without being noticed right away.

Porches

A porch is an outdoor area connected to a house, usually near a door. Some porches are covered. Families may sit on a porch or use it to keep things that are used outdoors.

Sophia finds a small plastic bucket on the porch to use while she works.

Backyard Gardening

Home gardening is a common activity in the United States. People may grow flowers, vegetables, herbs, or fruit in the ground, in containers, or in raised beds.

A raised bed is a garden area built above the surrounding ground. It can help hold the soil in place and can make a small space easier to use for gardening. Jackson offers to build one for Sophia.

Children's Projects

American children are often encouraged to try projects and hobbies on their own, such as gardening, crafts, building models, or caring for pets. Parents may allow children some independence while still keeping an eye on what they are doing.

Sophia begins the garden by herself, and Jackson later joins her. Their parents eventually notice how much time the children are spending together behind the garage and discover what they have made.

Family Words: Mom and Dad

American children commonly call their mother Mom and their father Dad. These are informal, affectionate family words.

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Before Reading

1. Look at the title **Sophia's Secret Garden**. Why do you think the garden is a secret?
2. Have you ever planted a seed or helped in a garden?
3. What do seeds need before they can begin to grow?
4. What might you find in an old, unused part of a backyard?

During/After Reading — Comprehension

5. Where did Sophia decide to make her garden?
6. What did she use instead of a garden tool?
7. What did Sophia find while she was clearing the ground?
8. Why did Sophia want to keep the garden secret?
9. How did Jackson discover the garden?
10. What did Jackson offer to build?
11. Why did they put strings on the fence?
12. What happened after Sophia waited for several days?
13. How did Jackson react when he saw the first sprout?
14. Why did the garden become difficult to keep secret?
15. How did Mom and Dad react when they discovered the garden?

Sequencing Exercise

Put these events in the correct order:

- Jackson discovered Sophia's secret.
- Sophia cleared away the junk and weeds.
- A tiny green sprout appeared.
- Sophia found a place behind the garage.
- Mom and Dad discovered the garden.
- Jackson helped build a raised bed.
- Sophia planted seeds.

Inference and Character

16. Why did Sophia use a soup spoon instead of asking for a garden tool?
17. Sophia expected Jackson to tease her. Why was she surprised by his reaction?
18. What does Jackson's offer to build a raised bed tell you about him?
19. Why did Jackson stop checking the garden as often while they waited for the seeds to grow?

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20. Why did Sophia keep checking?
21. How did working together change Sophia and Jackson's relationship?
22. Why was Sophia worried when her parents found the garden?
23. How had Sophia's secret garden changed by the end of the story?

WH-Words Questions — More Practice

Use complete sentences when possible.

Who started the secret garden?

What did Sophia use to dig in the soil?

When did Sophia see the first sprout?

Where did Sophia make her garden?

Why did Jackson build a raised bed?

How did Jackson discover Sophia's secret?

What did the children grow?

How did their parents react?

Vocabulary in Context

24. What does **sturdy** tell us about Sophia's soup spoon?
25. What does **stubborn** mean when the story describes the dandelion?
26. Sophia was **prying** at the dandelion. What was she trying to do?
27. What does **soaked** tell us about the ground after the rain?
28. What is the difference between a **seed** and a **sprout**?
29. What does **doubled** mean when Sophia says a plant doubled in size?
30. What is a **raised bed**, and why did Jackson build one?

Personal Connection

31. Have you ever made something without asking for help? What did you make?
32. Have you ever had to wait a long time for something you wanted to happen?
33. Would you rather plant flowers, vegetables, or both? Why?
34. Sophia and Jackson had different skills. How can people with different skills help each other?
35. If you found an unused patch of ground, what would you do with it?

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Optional Extension Activities

1. Plant a Seed

Plant a bean or another fast-growing seed in a small container.

Students can record:

Day — Water — What I See — Plant Height

Students can draw the plant as it changes.

2. From Seed to Plant

Ask students to draw four or five pictures showing how a plant grows.

Use sequence words:

First — Next — Then — After that — Finally

3. Design a Secret Garden

Students draw their own small garden.

Ask them to label several things in English, such as:

soil — flowers — beans — fence — seeds — water

Students can then describe their garden to a partner.

4. Sophia or Jackson?

Make two columns labeled **Sophia** and **Jackson**.

Students list what each child contributed to the garden.

Discuss how their different skills helped them succeed.

Teacher Note:

Sophia's Secret Garden combines reading comprehension with simple plant science and vocabulary about gardening.

The story can also introduce the idea that seeds need **water and suitable warmth to begin germination**, while the growing plant needs **light, water, and other resources** as it develops. The story itself expresses this in Sophia's child-friendly words: "It just needs the warmth and water to start, and sunlight to grow big."

For beginning ESL learners, teachers may select only a few garden words for active vocabulary. More advanced students can use the story for sequencing, describing plant growth, and discussing how Sophia and Jackson solve problems together.

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