

SCHOOL KITCHEN GARDENS

EARTH FIRST

By Nick King

The main source of food for many children today appears to them in bottles, packets and jars on supermarket shelves. Because of this it becomes difficult for them to relate to the origins of the food they eat and how it is produced. Many children today do not have the opportunity to experience the satisfaction of being intimately involved in the production of their own food, from a planted seed to food cooked and shared with their friends.

Developing and tending a vegetable garden, preparing and cooking the harvested produce develops in young children an increased understanding of the relationship between growing things and caring for the environment.

Benefits of a school kitchen garden

By becoming involved in a school kitchen garden program, children are given the opportunity of producing their own food from the creation and preparation of the soil, planting seeds and seedlings, tending and harvesting plants, preparing cooking and eating what they produce. Involvement in this process develops life-long skills in the kitchen and garden which equip them to lead lives which are not dependent on processed foods. The skills learned can also be transferred to the child's home environment, where they can apply what is learnt at home in their own garden with their family.

Kitchen garden programs emphasise the seasonal nature of growing and harvesting produce. This develops in young gardeners and cooks an appreciation of fresh seasonal food, and the advantages of planning food sources around seasonal availability, and an appreciation of local growing seasons and what grows well in their district and climate zone.

Teamwork and sharing are social skills which are benefits obtained from involvement in a kitchen garden program. Children need to work together at all stages of a kitchen garden project. They also have the opportunity to share food grown and cooked with friends. Kitchen gardens also provide opportunities for the involvement of volunteers from the community who can become part of the kitchen garden "team", and can also share the rewards.

Through involvement in a kitchen garden program, children can gain an appreciation and a practical understanding of environmental sustainability. They become exposed to concepts such as composting, mulching, fertilizing and other processes necessary to maintain a healthy growing environment.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden National Program

Started in Melbourne by celebrated chef and nutritionalist Stephanie Alexander, the aim of this program is pleasurable food education for young children. The underlying

belief is that by introducing this holistic approach we have a chance to positively influence children's food choices which have not been tried before.

The program was originally a Victorian based initiative, but is now a national program involving in excess of forty schools. Forbes North Primary school is leading the way as the first non-Victorian school to complete their kitchen garden plan and begin operating the kitchen garden program. Forbes North officially launched its program on 24 June.

Glenroi Heights School Kitchen Garden Program

Glenroi Heights Primary School has embarked on its own kitchen garden program. The aim of this program is to educate students about where food comes from. Glenroi Heights principal Jane Cameron hopes that through this program the school community can become involved in developing nutritional skills, attitudes and values which can be passed on to future generations and can become a feature of school and Glenroi community culture.

The schools mentioned above are but two of the many which are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of developing a kitchen garden program. There may be a time in the future when getting your hands dirty in the school kitchen garden will be part of the school curriculum.