

# School gardening

*Rebekah Panayides*

Every Thursday lunchtime I help run the garden club at my local primary school. We meet during playtime, 'we' being, myself, a couple of other willing parents and about 12 very enthusiastic children. The club is open to children in school years 1 to 4, which means an age range from 5 to 9 and sessions start in the middle of March, once the weather has begun to cheer up, and run right through to the October half term.

The garden club takes place at various sites within the school grounds. We take care of the school vegetable allotment, where we grow 'robust' vegetables such as potatoes, onions, garlic, squash, beans and cabbages. This patch provides just enough for each member to take home a small harvest (a very proud moment for all!), a home-grown donation for the school harvest festival, and one or two entries for our village flower show - last year we even won something - a third prize for our squash! This allotment leads through a willow arch into the 'bug garden' - a wild area where we try to make all sorts of creepy crawlies and wildlife feel at home. There's a huge bug hotel (a palatial stack of wooden pallets filled with bundles of hollow stemmed sticks, stacks of egg boxes and fir cones) a stag beetle home (builder's bucket with holes in the sides packed full of logs and bark mulch and then buried) and a des res for a hedgehog (an old bread crate buried under a log pile). The children love the idea of wildlife sharing their garden and in turn the wildlife seems to be happy with their low-cost housing.

Alongside the bug garden is our newly planted wildflower meadow. Last autumn the children helped plant pots of native flowers into our existing grassland and we're hoping this will attract an interesting variety of butterflies and moths. Finally, there is our sensory garden which is gardening club HQ. This has raised beds which we use for herbs and annual flowers, a bee border and, our prized asset, a greenhouse constructed from plastic 2 litre 'pop' bottles which one of the classes built as part of outdoor week. We now have somewhere to protect our seedlings and grow a much wider range of plants.

One of the children's favourite jobs is watering, and they'll literally water anything to death, stopping only when the pots float away or their feet are soaking. They also love digging and will spend the whole time searching for worms, woodlice and other bugs. It never ceases to amaze me the number of times we get squeals of 'there's a worm!' And there's always one or two of the children that are just happy weeding, despite what the rest of the group is up to. Every lesson we let them plant something to take home, but we've learnt never to give them the packet of seeds because regardless of the size of the pot they'll empty the entire packet in!

We try to stick to growing things that are easy, fast and productive. Big seeds such as beans, squash, cosmos, calendula, potatoes or bulbs are easy for the children to handle, especially when they're wearing gloves! And we try to grow plants that have a purpose such as flowers for bees or butterflies, herbs to use in cooking, or our latest venture - wheat to grow our own bread

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(free seed has been donated to schools by the Real Bread Campaign). The children love harvesting and it's amazing what you can interest them in on this wave of excitement.

Last year the whole class tasted nasturtium leaves and flowers - even my son, who is extremely unenthusiastic when it comes to eating his greens, had a go!

One of the biggest challenges with school gardening is coping with the holidays. Two weeks away at Easter isn't great when there are seedlings to tend, and the five weeks of summer coincide with peak production and the need for watering. We're still trying to perfect our timing and now try a combination of planting very early; first early potatoes and carrots sown in pots by mid March and left in the greenhouse, followed by later than average sowings such as main crop potatoes, squash and runners planted at the start of June. This way we try to have something to harvest before the children leave in summer and something to see and harvest when we come back.

For anyone planning to start a garden club at school there are some great resources around. I recommend reading 'The Playground Potting Shed' by Dominic Murphy which is both a diary and week by week guide to gardening in the school year, the RHS website is worth tapping into, and many vegetable seed companies give discounts or free seeds to schools. But the greatest asset to a garden club has to be hands on knowledge held by parents and grandparents. Our school gardening club is always looking for volunteers, so if you're willing to share your knowledge, have a sense of humour and are free on a Thursday lunchtime we'd love to see you!

*Rebekah gardens at home and at school in West Sussex.*