

SCHOOL GARDENS



School Gardens - keep it simple

If it is fun and easy the students will choose to do it at home in their own time. We have the responsibility as teachers to prepare our students for a more self-reliant future.

Supermarket fruit and vegetables should no longer be their first choice because:

- Poor nutritional quality due to travel and storage time.
- Un-necessary, unhealthy chemical residues even on NZ grown vegetables (on average they need to be sprayed 5-15 times because they are grown in depleted soils with artificial fertilizers).
- Unacceptable travel miles and not just on un seasonal foodstuffs.
- Lack of variety: only a few basic fruit and vegetables are seen in supermarkets out of the thousands of edible plants available - diversity needs to be valued and encouraged for all sorts of reasons.

Organic vegetables are healthy vegetables grown in living balanced soils (no sprays needed) but are more expensive ** to buy BUT growing your own costs little! (**this is relative...one organic heritage apple a day keeps the doctor away - but not for supermarket applesa recent study has proved the antioxidant count is now just a fraction of what is needed!)

In tough economic times fruit and vegetables are often what are dropped first of shopping lists as they don't fill up hungry stomachs cheaply!

Often, in this day and age, children's parents and even their grandparents have had no experience of growing their own food - they will probably have well-tended flower gardens! If we do our job well children can go home and use their gardening skills to teach their parents. Putting in high fences, large raised beds and carting tons of earth can't be repeated by children. It tells them that money and big muscles is what you most need to have a garden! If parents only have flower gardens the children could ask to interplant some salad vegetables. Red lettuce, rainbow silver beet, chives and more are gorgeous editions to a flower garden and there will be less weeding needed by mum! If you have a spade or fork you can just start a patch in your back yard- even without tools gardening can take place in all kinds of ways.

Some simple and fun options:

1. Sprouting seeds These are the cheapest and quickest healthiest vegetables - just add water and wait 2-7 days! Can be done inside on even the coldest days- this should be a continual process in every classroom in NZ- We propose 'Sprouts in Schools' to run parallel to the Fruit in Schools programme will get the children into another lifelong habit to improve their health and well-being. Sprouts in Schools

2. Small container planting All children love being given a paper cup naming it and making holes in the bottom. Fill them with potting mix and give them a pea or a bean to plant- even more exciting if they are all different varieties to enjoy observing and comparing. Leaning to plant it just double the depth of the seed. Remembering to not keep digging it up to see if it is growing! (Plant some around the edge of a glass jar for the children to observe what's happening under the soil!) Remembering to water it every two days- just this much and no more! The excitement when the plant appears out of the soil and then being so excited to come to school each day to see how their pea or bean is doing. Line them up along a sunny window sill with string lines across the row for them to grow up on (6 at 10cm intervals should do it). They can be grown here most of the year round and will provide greenery and freshen the air at the same time they are growing food! Do you have pot plants in your classroom? Why not have food plants as pot plants- tomatoes, avocados, silver beet, pineapple - non edible pot plants are a waste of space!

3. Random Larger Containers: Go to a second hand shop and buy any containers- buckets, boots, baby bath, pots, spouting, suitcases, wooden boxes. Poke through some drainage holes and add some stones on the bottom and fill it with compost \$7.00 per 40 litres from a garden centre or hardware shop. (Or use your own rich composted soil - see our website for great info sheet on composting) Arrange artistically in a sunny spot and get planting! Even easier, get you plastic bag of compost - lie it on one side and poke through some drainage holes, turn it over and on the other side make a letter H slit in the top, fold back the two flaps and plant in it.

4. Old Tyres Get some old tyres from a garage and plant 2-3 potatoes in the soil inside the first one and add some good compost. Each week as the potatoes grow add straw up to their necks and give them a water. Add extra tyres as needed. When ready to harvest remove the top tyre, eat the potatoes, next week remove the next tyre and so on. So little space is needed to grow potatoes!

5. Intensive Garden in a hanging bucket

- a. Get a \$1 plastic bucket place it upside down and cut a 2 cm hole in it right in the middle and four around the middle of the bucket.
- b. Plant a tomato in that bottom hole and arrange a circle of card board with a slit in it to keep the roots of the tomato from slipping through.
- c. Turn the bucket up the right way and hang it by its handle and fill it with good potting mix.
- d. Plant strawberries in the side holes. e. Plant lettuces or other salad plants in the top of the bucket
- f. Hang it in its permanent position within reach of watering and harvesting. (The tomato is happy growing down- no need to support the branches! And strawberries thrive grown on the side of containers- all their roots have their own space to grow.

6. Raised No-dig Gardens A low wooden frame is all that is needed to outline a garden bed (so no-one walks on it) and raise it that extra 15 cm and therefore that extra 5 degrees in growing temperature. Old weather boards will do the trick, even better 25mm x 150mm (6 "x 1 ") rough sawn Oregon planks and, for the deluxe version, 25mm x 200mm (8" x 1") dressed macrocarpa. You will need to replace the boards every few years but NEVER be tempted to use tanalized wood- the toxins leach into your soil and soon these will be banned in from every food stream. If you BOT and parents really want to make it permanent you could build small concrete walls that could also be sat on while the children work. There is no need to make them higher unless there is a wheelchair bound student or a teacher with a poor back- everyone else should use the simple version. The width of the beds should be double the arm span of the children so they can reach the middle from both sides- for average adults that is 1.2 metres. They may be 80cm for juniors and 100cm for Year 4-8. (See sheet on our website all about setting up and running raised garden beds)

7. Simply Living- 'a gatherers guide to New Zealand's fields, forests and shores' by Gwen Skinner This book is a guide to the bountiful diversity of food available to all of us to supplement what we grow ourselves- Once a month have a wild food feast in your classroom- try Fat Hen soup or Creamed Nettles. Weeds are just as nutritious as the vegetables we grow- we just have a whole lot of re-learning to do!

TOP 10 TIPS FOR GARDENING IN SCHOOLS

- Plant little and often for a constant supply- don't rely on just one main crop
- Use non-hybrid seeds so you can save them and use them year after year
- Choose fast growing veges especially - it seems a long process for children! Non hearting lettuces can be lightly browsed as they grow.
- Begin your seedlings in the classroom especially when it is too cold to plant outside
- Plant ready grown seedlings as well to speed the process up
- Plant what the children are likely to eat and enjoy
- Make liquid manure in a big barrel to feed you plants especially if you soil is poor
- Never leave the soil bare- plant green crops whenever it is - this adds to the soil while protecting it from weather and weeds. Once you want to plant again they are easily removed.
- Enjoy the cycle of the plants - let the biggest and best plants go to seed, gather the seed to be stored and used again next year.
- Keep it simple - you don't need structures and fences- put all your energy into building soil and growing lots of food so there is enough to share!
- Buy one good NZ Organic Gardening Book as a resource for your school - don't buy one from overseas as the conditions and seasons are different. Organic Gardening in NZ by Richard Llewellyn Hudson is our favourite but there are many other good ones.

Visit our websites Organic Gardening page we have lots of good information sheets on all aspects of gardening that will be useful. We also are happy to answer questions either through the website or direct email- we have a couple of dozen experienced gardeners in Riverton and between us all we have a lot of local knowledge. There is no reason or need to buy artificial fertilizers or sprays- set the right example. The Environment Centre is also a good source for gardening resources.

Robyn Guyton , South Coast Environment Centre , October 2008