

July 27, 2001

# **PRESS RELEASE from the office of Stephanie Alexander: The Kitchen Garden at Collingwood College**

An extensive vegetable garden is being built in the grounds of Melbourne's Collingwood College and will become the focal point for an innovative **gardening, cooking and food appreciation program** conceived by **Stephanie Alexander**. The project will be called **The Kitchen Garden at Collingwood College**.

The garden is being created at Collingwood College because of the exceptional interest and enthusiasm shown by principal Frances Laurino, her staff, Manager of Community Gardens Projects (DHS), Basil Natoli, and the supportive parent community and school council.

**The Kitchen Garden at Collingwood College will be officially launched on site on Friday 27 July at 11.30am by the Minister for Housing Bronwyn Pike**, who will plant the first tree in the garden. A barbecue lunch donated by Jonathan's of Collingwood, Toscanos of Kew and the Yarra Valley's 'Wild About Fruit', and cooked by Stephanie and the school staff, will be held alongside 'the works'.

Many students at Collingwood College (Prep to year 12) live in high-density housing with little or no access to soil. The school's students represent 36 different nationalities, rich in cultural diversity, which the garden will reflect in the produce grown.

*"Over the last few years I have found myself thinking more and more about the ways in which children learn about food" said Stephanie. "For many urban children there is no way they can relate the food they see in bottles, packets and jars with soil, sunshine, ripeness and satisfying activity. As young adults, many are tentative in their efforts to feed themselves, and are unable to offer themselves one of life's most accessible joys – sharing delicious food with family and friends every day.*

*I wanted to investigate whether by creating and caring for an extensive vegetable garden within a school's grounds and then preparing and cooking the harvested produce, that children can develop greater enjoyment of flavour and texture, a better understanding of cultural and culinary difference, and an increased understanding of the relationship between growing things and caring for the environment. An equally important part of such an experiment will be the sharing around the table and talk about what's being eaten."*

Stephanie is dubious about the efficacy of the words *nutrition* or *health*:

*"In no way is this being disrespectful of the importance of both. I am however convinced that changes in food choices do not come about as a result of cautionary advice, charts or pyramids, but by example*

*and by positive experiences. If an overwhelming number of children no longer receive such positive experiences at home where are they going to get them? The answer of course is nowhere. Manufacturers and advertisers want to sell them plenty of things, but home-grown and home-prepared food is not amongst them."*

This is the dream: Each child in grades 3-6 (approximately 100 children), is to spend at least 1 hour a week working in the garden and as the first vegetables approach maturity, they will harvest and cook them. The garden planned is extensive and includes 15 raised vegetable beds, a fruit tree orchard, a herb garden, composting area and worm farm as well as an outdoor barbecue and shady eating areas. Ecologically sustainable farming methods will be a focus of the kitchen garden wherever possible. The class luncheons will be a highlight for the students, staff and parents. If the desired level of funding is achieved, the school will employ specialised staff who are experts in gardening and cooking and as importantly, convinced of the educational and social benefits of the project. Throughout the first year Stephanie will spend half a day per week with the kids, teaching, cooking and even perhaps weeding. It is envisaged that a volunteer group of well-known chefs, gardeners and food enthusiasts will be recruited along the way.

The principal has generously assigned an area of the school grounds; an energetic team of parent volunteers has lent expertise and elbow grease to the preparation of the soil and the landscaping of the garden. Funding is being sought from government and philanthropic sources to enable the program to become an established part of the school curriculum. Some funding towards the program has already been pledged through the **Education Trust**, the **Department of Human Services** and the **City of Yarra**.

It is Stephanie's fervent hope that the Kitchen Garden at Collingwood College will become a model for other Victorian or Australian primary schools to introduce hands-on food education in their schools. To this end, a website and learning network is being set up to record the garden's progress and educational outcomes, with the generous assistance of the **Education Foundation**.

*"The seasons wait for no-one" says Stephanie. "We must build the garden beds now and start sowing the first seeds. We are hopeful that funding for the full program will be secured in time for spring planting-out as soon as the ground warms up."*

This exciting project was inspired by the success of a similar project developed by restaurateur **Alice Waters in Berkeley, California, at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School**.

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