



A Principal's Perspective
Catherine Phillips, 'Go for your life' Kitchen Garden Project at Bittern Primary School

Before we received the 'Go for your life' Kitchen Garden Project with Stephanie Alexander grant, we already had a small garden and were trying to cook with the produce in our staffroom or in classrooms but were becoming frustrated with the lack of space and facilities. The funding allowed us to expand our garden and put in a kitchen and have all the students from Years 3–6 (five classes) cooking by early Term 2 in the first year of the grant. Term 1 was spent building our kitchen, expanding our garden, buying utensils, planning the lessons and recruiting and training volunteers. It took until early Term 4 for our garden to produce enough vegetables to be almost self-sufficient; we can now feed half the school every week.

We are a school of 220 students on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula and while all our classrooms are portable/relocatable, we have a permanent art room that was only used for half the week for art classes. The other half of the week it sat empty. We combined the kitchen with the art room and now the art room is used every day. We put three workstations along one wall, with three ovens, three sinks and three workbenches. A fourth workbench is on the other side of the room. We used a local cabinet maker to design and build our kitchen. He was also a parent at the school and kept the costs as low as possible.

The art room already had gas, water and space that had previously been used for storage. The garden was expanded to include more garden beds, a water tank, a seating area, a greenhouse and more.

Every class spends a 45-minute session in the garden with their class teacher and the Garden Specialist (also the school gardener) and volunteers each week. The Garden

Specialist sets out the tasks for the class for the session. It is not time release for the class teacher.

Every class also spends a 90-minute session in the kitchen with their class teacher and the kitchen teacher and volunteers. We selected a teacher who is a home cook for the position of Kitchen Specialist, rather than a chef, but many other schools have made different decisions in this area. This session is not time release for the class teacher either. Teachers can then follow up garden or kitchen topics back in their classroom.

In the first year we spent a little more than we had budgeted for. The class materials (dry goods and ingredients) were costly to start with, but by October we were harvesting most of the ingredients from the garden and our dry goods were bought in bulk, so our costs were reduced.

Many of the costs were 'one-off' costs, such as the building of the kitchen and establishment of the garden.

We found that the *Kitchen Garden Cooking with Kids* book is full of great ideas, plans and recipes. It is essential reading.

The benefits from the Program have been many and varied and in areas we had not considered. Polite dinner-table conversations are had on a regular basis at the end of the meal and students are becoming more adventurous in their tastes. They understand the garden-to-table cycle and will discuss companion planting and the benefits of compost with visitors. Many students have started vegetable gardens at home and cook on a regular basis at home for their families. Many wonderful relationships have been built between volunteers and the students they work with each week. Social skills are improving, and life skills are growing along with the garden. The students are a delight to watch cook, even with very sharp knives, and are fully engaged in the Program each week. In a crowded curriculum, this Program is a winner and I would recommend it to all primary schools.

As with all good programs, the success of the Kitchen Garden Program lies in the relationships that develop: relationships between the Kitchen Specialist and the Garden Specialist, the SAKGF representative and the school, the kitchen/garden specialists and

the classroom teachers, the kitchen/garden specialists and the volunteers, and most importantly every adult and each student who is part of the Program.

Words of advice for other schools?

In the garden:

- Keep the garden plan simple.
- Use recycled materials as much as possible.
- Ask everywhere for donations of plants and materials.
- Put the chooks and compost bins in the same area to keep the smell in one place.
- Recycle old school tables into potting tables.
- Use an old whiteboard to put up the gardening plan for the group.
- Invest in gloves, gumboots and good-quality garden tools.
- Have the students build scarecrows and sculptures for the garden.

In the Kitchen:

- Invest in a commercial dishwasher; it saves time on washing up and allows more time for students to enjoy the food and talk about their cooking.
- Put the menu and recipes in the newsletter the week before and ask for donations of the ingredients; this helps reduce your shopping bill.
- Give the menu and recipes to the volunteers the week before so that they are familiar with the recipes on the day.
- Give the menu and recipes to the students the week before so that they can read the recipes and be prepared.
- Design a flyer promoting the Program in your school and take a day to put the flyer up everywhere in your area: libraries, health food stores, restaurants, churches, recreational centres, TAFE and other local organisations. You will be amazed at how many new volunteers you get, from outside of your usual school community. Put a contact name and number on the flyer that can be torn off and taken away. Not everyone carries a pen.
- Give all volunteers a package of information when they come for a tour and remember to take the time to debrief with them after a session. Let them just sit in and watch a session to start with.
- Forge links with a local restaurant if possible.