



**The Kitchen Garden Classroom: Educating Children for a Healthy Future 13
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Keynote Address from Stephanie Alexander**

My life as a food lover and a food activist is a direct result of growing up in a family where what we ate, how it was prepared, how it had been grown, and who we shared it with all mattered a great deal. As children we helped Grandpa and Mum and Dad in the garden, the cowshed and in the duck yard, we watched and helped as bread was made, or potatoes dug, or chooks were plucked onto wet newspaper, and we licked the pudding basins.

My mother's interest in everything to do with the table was unusual in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon Australia of the 1950s when I was a girl. She was curious about culinary traditions and her cooking was broadly influenced – by refugee friends from Austria and Poland; by her interest in traditional English country food, by her enthusiasm for the aesthetic and flavours of Japan, and of course by what grew in her vegetable and herb garden. Even the indigenous warrigal greens (or NZ spinach) that grew up around the tea tree and the nettles from the creek banks found their way to the table. I will never forget Grandpa wrestling with squirming eels from the creek. She loved to invite others to share the family table, to tell us stories, to argue and debate ... As we grew older we invited our teenage friends to share our table. They were usually astonished at what they experienced – the food, the talk, the importance attached to the table.

I believe that children need to be encouraged to take a broad and active interest in food; about where it comes from, and how delicious unexpected or new foods can be, and how enjoyable it can be to share a task. They also need to experience

the social importance of the table. And all children need to experience the magic and the beauty of a garden, especially one that produces food.

If their home experiences of growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing a wide range of foods are not frequent and enjoyable; or even more serious, just don't happen, that child is virtually being given over to the advertisers and through them to the manufacturers of convenience foods.

When we discuss alarming trends of childhood diabetes, or obesity or rising rates of dental decay we are really discussing the results of poor food choices. The health problems are real. So far the solutions proposed to change the behaviour of young children have all tended to be couched in negative and cautionary language.

They are shown pyramids of foods with everything they love frowned upon. Make sure you have 2 servings of fruits and 5 of vegetables a day; don't eat fat; restrict the fried food you eat; never eat a slice of salami; only eat low-fat dairy foods and so on. These messages are all very well-intentioned and mostly sensible (although I do take issue with the salami and low-fat cheese!) but they do not seem to influence the behaviour of children.

We need to capture children's interest, their curiosity, their energy as well as their appetite.

We need to make kids feel successful, and give them new skills. We need to allow them to dig holes and plant things and watch them grow and be amazed at how it happens. And to notice the butterflies and the ladybirds and the flowers in their garden. And to properly understand what 'in season' means. And perhaps for the first time, experience how a tomato grows, and how many different varieties and colours there are. And we need to teach them to use a sharp knife, and how to make simple pasta sauces, and leafy salads and how to poach, sauté and grill fresh food. And to have fun whilst they are learning so much.

So my dream was and my vision still is – to make pleasurable food education a reality for as many Australian children as possible. Anna Dollard, now the Senior Project Officer, and I started to turn this dream into a reality working from the front room of my house in March 2001.

We have come a long way since then – some of the milestones:

- Establishing a not-for-profit Foundation
- Succeeding in attracting State and Federal interest and financial investment
- Attracting significant corporate, philanthropic and private sponsorship
- Producing a Book, 2 DVDs, an Implementation Manual, brochures, newsletters, posters and a fabulous expanding website
- Servicing media interest too broad and numerous to mention
- Commenced dialogue with New Zealand
- We now support 49 Victorian projects – 27 of these are active, with recruited kitchen and garden specialists. 22 were announced last week
- We are planning to support an additional 190 Australian projects over the next 4 years, including establishing a Demonstration Kitchen Garden project in each State and Territory
- Our pilot Kitchen Garden Program at Collingwood College has been visited by hundreds – from politicians to educators, to parents and principals to Jamie Oliver. No one has left unimpressed
- We have organised and held Professional Training Days
- We have held workshops in schools all over Victoria and Information Sessions in all manner of venues
- This is our first annual Conference
- We have presented our vision to the Standing Parliamentary Committee on Obesity in Canberra.

Our organisation is lean and well organised under the guidance of an outstanding Executive Officer, Ange Barry. She reports to a Board of eight members.

We have two Project Officers;

We have support office staff;

We have a National Coordinator;

We have a part-time Partnership Manager constantly hunting for further support;

And myself more or less full-time.

What we don't have is an endowment fund or pools of money. As with all charitable organisations our funding needs are a constant anxiety. Fundraising of one sort and another is ongoing.

It is time for me to ponder the future.

All over the world there are questions being asked about food supply, about 'green' agriculture, about using urban spaces to grow food and involve communities, about seasonal awareness, about the need for more farmers' markets, about 'food miles', about organics and permaculture. More and more community groups are becoming active.

And all over the developed world we hear that children are eating food that is making them sick. *(The UK Government has announced recently its ambition to be the first major nation to reverse the rising tide of obesity and overweight in the population by ensuring that everyone is able to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Our initial focus will be on children: by 2020, we aim to reduce the proportion of overweight and obese children to 2000 levels. This strategy sets out plans to introduce compulsory cooking for all 11 to 14 year olds by 2011).*

I cannot escape the belief that for children's attitudes to change in a significant way the changes have to be viewed by them as desirable and possible. This is why a school program appears to me to be the best possible way to educate our next generation of consumers so that they are able to include fresh and good-tasting food in their lives every day, and so that they spend time every day in an atmosphere where such things are valued. Along the way they will also learn to work cooperatively, to take pride in what they achieve, and they very quickly become increasingly open to the new and different.

The challenge of Infrastructure – making the kitchen and the garden in a school

I am essentially a practical person and the real nuts and bolts issues to do with infrastructure loom large in my thinking about the future. For every school the establishment of a teaching kitchen has been the most significant challenge. And the most expensive.

We have had some dialogue with planners who are involved in designing new schools in Victoria. We would like to see a teaching kitchen incorporated in the plans for all new school buildings in every state, particularly in the primary years. Maybe this can be a multi-purpose space. Certainly it can be used by other community groups, perhaps in a way that may return some money to the school.

'It *can* be done' is the message of today. The 24 (or 27) projects now into their second year assisted by funding through the Victorian Government's 'Go for your life' health strategy have almost all completed the creation of a teaching kitchen and a beautiful garden. Every story is different. Every school is proud of its achievement. Most stories involve the conversion of an already existing space in a school, but there are those who have started from scratch.

If the next four years convinces the Federal Government of the value of this Program, it might be the time to request funding for such a building in much the

same way as schools have been able to apply for new buildings under the now-defunct Investing In Our Schools initiative, or for someone of my age, I recall the watershed change in school funding that followed the election of the Whitlam government. Suddenly secondary schools could apply for funds to build a Resource Centre (aka library).

Again in the UK recent report there is a promise of £150 million in targeted capital funding for those local authorities with the highest need for investment in school kitchens ...

Today you will see designs by Masters in Architecture students from the Melbourne School of Design at the University of Melbourne in response to a brief to design a practical, attractive, environmentally sustainable design for a school teaching kitchen. I would like to see this work supported by a major developer, or producer of materials, or both. There will be plenty of opportunities for prototypes to be trialled in the 190 new projects planned.

I would like to see a more proactive interest from commercial suppliers of components that are needed for these new kitchen garden projects. Why wouldn't they want to see their products featured in schools where they can be appreciated by the wider community, often their customers? This includes suppliers of flooring, whitegoods, plumbing supplies, earthmoving services, steel, timber, organic soil and compost, paint, hothouses, irrigation systems and water tanks to name a few essential things.

Some schools have lobbied very hard and have achieved welcome donations of such items. But it would be great to see a wider sponsorship of the movement, maybe with preferred suppliers bidding for contracts through government. Principals, teachers and kitchen and garden specialists would prefer to use their time in contact with the students rather than on the phone asking for donations.

Specialist Teacher Training

We acknowledge that the need to have kitchen and garden specialists deliver the Program in schools is an additional cost, as the classroom teacher also needs to be present.

An alternative might be for the garden and kitchen specialists to do teacher training. Or, qualified teachers could opt for specialist training in either kitchen or garden, or both.

To this end we are in consultation with more than one training institution to consider short specialist courses in basic kitchen practice, to be available to qualified teachers, which would then be augmented by additional professional development as needed via SAKGF. Or specialised courses established in tertiary vocational institutions that could also be taken by qualified teachers. We see this as an essential step in moving the Program into more schools and reducing the costs. Specialists bring passion and know-how to the Program.

Our thinking and investigation along these lines is in its infancy.

Burnley Horticulture College, now part of the University of Melbourne, developed a six-week course to train gardeners specifically for work in school kitchen gardens. This course has been popular although its emphasis has shifted towards acquiring general horticultural skills, with some reference to school gardens, not kitchen gardens as we envisage them.

Sustainability

The funding available at present is very welcome but it is for two years only. The assumption is that in those two years the infrastructure will be firmly established

and the only cost to the school from then on will be the salaries for the two part-time specialists. For many schools this is a source of considerable anxiety – plotting and wondering how to find the necessary dollars to keep the Program in their school. We will be providing the other State Governments with information about how the Program has succeeded in Victorian and asking them to consider contributing to this cost.

These specialists do an amazing job and it is important that they be paid appropriately. To sustain their interest and encourage professional development there ought to be a career structure in place, or at least some opportunity for salary increments. Another area for political lobbying.

Also the school and the Education departments and other funding bodies need to be aware that there are other costs. A school garden can only produce a part of what 150 or more children can consume in their kitchen classes each week. It will need to be supplemented. Schools also need basic dry goods – flour, oil, dairy, spices etc. There are also administration costs, such as extensive photocopying of recipes, and cleaning.

A key issue for sustainability is how well the Program has been integrated into the general curriculum. A buzz word is ‘engaged learning’ and if ever there was a good example it is the Kitchen Garden program. Where the principal and staff are enthusiastic and regard the kitchen and the garden as additional learning spaces, it is more likely that the program will be considered essential to the educational aims of the school. There will be many opportunities today to explore how the Kitchen Garden Program complements classroom teaching.

The Kitchen Garden model as in SAKG schools

We have been criticised for setting the bar so high. Why not be content with a small garden growing some edible crops and a program of environmental

education. And maybe a barbecue or some other portable cooking device now and then.

My answer is that if we are pushing for significant social change it makes no sense at all to go for halfway measures. We need to demonstrate that the full program can deliver changed attitudes. We are aiming to convince children to make positive changes to the ways in which they choose and consume food. This will not happen merely by knowing how to grow food organically. They must prepare it and taste it. Often.

We are eagerly anticipating the results of our Evaluation currently being undertaken by researchers from the McCaughey Centre at the University of Melbourne. These results are due in the middle of next year.

This is not to deny the value of an edible garden and environmental teaching. Many schools that now have a fully-functioning kitchen garden with a teaching kitchen, a productive garden, and an outdoor learning space started with the smaller model. They have embraced the more holistic model. And they are all telling us it has to be one of the most meaningful programs in their school.

Our challenge is to make it possible for more and more schools to make this choice.

Spreading the Idea

Our website is becoming more and more valuable as a way of spreading the word. I am in demand as a speaker but I am not convinced that this is the most effective use of my time given the size of Australia. We will continue to explore and use an increasing number of new technologies, especially as we expect our new schools in 2009 to be located anywhere from Broome to Hobart.

We are finalising plans to offer a Subscription Program so that schools not yet able to establish 'the full Monty', or unsuccessful at a granting round, can at least tap into our experience and knowledge base and start planning their own program and finding friends in their own wider community.

I will continue to lobby those I think may be able to help. We would like to work with others who share our beliefs, be they parents, teachers, corporate or philanthropic organisations or other like-minded bodies such as Slow Food. I am unashamed that I am looking for practical assistance, which usually means dollars, rather than just gathering sympathetic voices.

The success of my book *The Cook's Companion* has effectively promoted my central message that everyone is capable of making simple and delicious food without anxiety. Now I am building on that precious public confidence and trying as hard as I can to convince parents at home that they should be pushing hard for a Kitchen Garden Program to be considered for their child's primary school.

I know that you will all have a marvellous day.

Thank you for coming.