

COUNTRYSIDE CLASSROOM

Connecting schools with **food**,
farming and the **natural environment**

School Gardening Stories

Countryside Classroom Spring 2020 Competition, with Spear & Jackson



For the competition, schools were asked to tell us about their school gardening activities and plans, and how a prize of Spear & Jackson tools and equipment could help them. Twenty prizes were awarded, to schools of all kinds and from all over the country.

The following extracts from the winning stories will inspire, inform and amuse you, and provide a window into the huge variety of ways that schools get growing, whatever their circumstances, and the many benefits they gain from their gardening activities. (Note: the images are all taken from winning entries, but do not relate to the adjacent text.)

The value of vegetables, *Alphington Primary School, Devon*

Our school is right on the edge of Exeter – a town where children often come from houses with small gardens with AstroTurf, or no garden at all, and so have limited gardening experiences at home. As a school, we want to give children experiences which evoke a passion for gardening, ensuring our students understand the importance of growing crops and how their food gets onto their plates. Last year we managed to grow a whole range of produce thanks to donations of seeds and seedlings from parents and carers. We used some of the vegetables we grew in school meals, we cooked food with the children and sold some of the crop to the parents and carers on the playground after school.

Sharing Friendship Gardens, *Bredon Hill Academy, Worcestershire*

Every class is responsible for a raised bed in our friendship gardens, with learners working to produce a display for our open gardens event each summer. These Year 6 gardeners work at



lunchtime and form time in our community spaces growing beautiful flowers, tasty produce for our dining hall and cookery room and improving habitats for biodiversity.

Growing (and feeding) time at the zoo, *Bridlington Animal Park, Yorkshire*

At Bridlington Animal Park we run three classes for home-educated children. As we are their only continuing educational place we are, in effect, their school. We have a twist on our vegetable garden as all the fruit and veg is grown by the children as food for our zoo animals. It is a double-sided educational tool for the children. How to grow, and the animal food chain. We have raised beds and an allotment and a really cool herb garden where all the herbs are grown inside recycled containers, such as an old toilet and an old wellington boot. We also have a bee garden with two beehives so we can produce honey for our meerkats and marmoset monkeys. The children maintain the bee garden to try and help them with year round pollen.

Projects on alternative veg, and recycling, *Cardross Primary School, Argyll and Bute*

Cardross schoolchildren love gardening and the outdoors. Unfortunately, due to severe stormy weather last year, much of our vegetable garden was destroyed. However, that has not knocked our enthusiasm and we are determined to get the garden growing once again! This year we have decided to work on three projects:

- The Vegetable Garden, to de-weed the wee raised beds and plant various 'alternative' vegetables such as blue potatoes, golden beetroot and golf-ball carrots. We have already successfully planted elephant garlic
- Pocket Garden Competition, to design a pocket garden for the Keep Scotland Beautiful competition. This year's theme is Coasts and Waters and we plan to create a design using recycled materials washed ashore on Cardross beach
- The Recycled Greenhouse, to gut and clean out our recycled greenhouse so it can be used to store gardening equipment, and to grow herbs and small plants.

A garden to support special needs, *Earthsea School, Norfolk*

We are a specialist school catering for children aged 6 to 12 with additional needs, both educational and social, emotional and mental health. Gardening can be a fun way to deliver lessons around not only science but literacy and maths as well, and once the garden is



complete we hope to use it for outdoor lessons. The children are really hoping to plant lots of flowers and grow lots of fruit and vegetables which they are hoping to share with the Nursing Home next door, and in turn support the development of social, emotional and mental health as well as their education.

The tarmac jungle, inspired by local history, *Fircroft Primary School, Surrey*

At Fircroft, the children have been inspired by the past to get growing! They have been working with a local historian to discover their forgotten rural heritage and that their concrete jungle was once a fertile part of Surrey, and not so long ago. Children and local volunteers plan to transform their barren tarmac playground starting with a potted hedgerow containing native species like hazel underplanted with historical daffodils and bulbs that were once raised locally. This is part-completed and has been also an amazing opportunity to link with other outside organizations from Cornish daffodil farmers to Habitat Aid. Future plans include:

- A bee-friendly flower border, fit for any beekeeping medieval monastery
- A mini potted Ancient Surrey woodland
- A wetland garden
- An evolution garden
- Growing plants for sale and for sharing locally, so the children have a greater understanding of their own market garden heritage.

Growing food, improving lives, *Grampian Primary School, Derbyshire*

The school is situated in an area of high deprivation and our pupils and families face many challenges, including poor income, unemployment, poor health, barriers to services, a poor living environment and high crime rates. As a school we try to break down these barriers, change mind-sets and open up a new world of learning and aspiration for our children. We have major concerns around our pupils having limited involvement in an active and healthy lifestyle, and to address this we have set up an allotment in the school grounds. The allotment will help us, as a school, to educate our children on where the food that they eat comes from. It will support teaching and learning beyond the classroom and have huge health benefits by keeping our children active. Some of the results will be used at cooking club, so the children will be able to see first-hand the results of their hard work and be given a better understanding of food and nutrition.



Creating crossovers though gardening, *Grange Primary School, London*

We have the ultimate aim of starting a free, weekly, lunchtime 'Countryside Classroom' gardening club for Grange Primary's students. Our school is based in an urban area but there are plenty of small but perfectly formed green spaces around the playground. We hope our budding little gardeners will learn valuable skills and take this enthusiasm back to their homes, whether they have a window-ledge indoor herb garden or back-garden vegetable patch. The PTA is also really excited for the gardening club to become a cornerstone of the events being planned this year, tying in with their 'reuse, recycle, and repurpose' initiative. The gardening club has the potential to engage a whole range of children and parents, highlighting the importance of sustainability and caring for our environment. The gardening club can also crossover into events like bake sales that use produce from the gardens, a 'Gardenplace' stall at school fairs where we can sell plants and flowers (reinvesting money in to the gardens), plus putting on events where we can give away seedlings, to continue pushing the gardening crossover between home and school.

Imagination beats a zero budget, *Kelsale CEVC Primary School, Suffolk*

We have managed to spend the first half of the spring term ripping out overgrown flower beds and creating seven fun play beds, each depicting a different landscape. All of this has been created through scouring parents homes and getting creative with zero budget. A volcano made out of towel soaked in cement, ferns found growing behind a neighbour's polytunnel, woodchip from the chap down the road felling a tree and a bug hotel made out of items found around a builder's yard. At the Christmas Fete, these hard-working children sat and made 20 wreaths out of foraged materials out of the gardens, which they sold and raised £125 to repair the leaking shed and to start a pot to eventually replace the crumbling sleepers in their holistic allotment.

Developing a wellbeing garden, *Lydbrook Primary School, Gloucestershire*

We are a small primary school situated in Lydbrook, in the picturesque Forest of Dean. We are focusing on using the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' mantra in our daily school life, which helps towards our general wellbeing and mental health. We are currently focusing on 'Taking Notice' and we are doing this by creating a school Wellbeing Garden. Each child in the school has drawn their own design, and a local garden designer has produced a final



design using their ideas which we are following. The children have written letters to local companies asking for help, and we have received a very positive response, with donations of local stone and plants. The nearby sawmills are donating locally sourced wood which one class are using to make a seating area. We are looking forward to celebrating all our hard work at a grand opening of the garden in June 2020.

Linking the garden to learning, *May Park Primary School, Bristol*

We are a large, inner-city primary school in Bristol. The school is aiming for Eco School status and is looking into creating a more sustainable ethos at the school. We are doing a huge community tree-planting session in April and have plans to link the library themes to the wooded area we have in school. The reception class has a lovely garden area which we are planning to reinvigorate this year. There are six planters where we want to plant veg and flowers with the kids. Many children at school have limited access to gardens and wildlife areas so we feel the more they have at school the better.

Developing skills for life, *Nancy Reuben Primary School, London*

The Nancy Reuben School Garden was created only a couple of years ago out of some bare patches of soil at the front of the school. Thanks to the enthusiasm of the early-years and primary-aged pupils, the garden now produces 15 to 20 different types of fruit, vegetables, flowers and herbs in the summer months. The children are learning how to prepare the soil, plant seeds, water and look after their seedlings and then harvest their produce. Then the children learn about healthy eating and how not to waste food by preparing healthy recipes with their own fruit and vegetables. They have also gained an appreciation of, and respect for, nature.

A large, productive garden brings many benefits, *Northfleet School for Girls, Kent*

Northfleet Community Farm, part of Northfleet School for Girls, is a two-acre farm, home to a range of farm animals such as goats, lambs, chickens, ducks and rabbits. We have a series of raised beds as well as a large allotment to grow a wide variety of vegetables all-year-round, from sweetcorn to swiss chard and parsnips to potatoes. These vegetables are used in the school canteen dinners, sold to staff and also provide fresh food for our animals. We have built a herb garden which we encourage the community to help themselves to as they enter and leave the farm. Last year we introduced a wildflower meadow for our beehive



and to attract other beneficial pollinating insects. We have a large compost heap and a leaf pile to make our own organic fertiliser but this year we plan to implement a wormery and also improve our water collection and recycling system.

As well as the school students using the farm, we run farm workshops for a range of groups such as special-educational- needs children and young people, local primary schools and scout groups. They have learned about how food grows, and worked together to grow and harvest produce throughout the year. They have become familiar with British wildlife and how and why we attract it to a vegetable garden and protect it through the building of hedgehog houses, bug hotels, bat boxes, bird feeders and the nature pond and wildflower meadow. They have overcome fears of dirt and insects to appreciate the health benefits of outdoor activities and developed their social integration, communication and resilience skills through cooperative work with peers and adults. By promoting the use of time with nature to help visitors deal with mental health concerns we hope they gain lifelong skills that can have a positive impact on their mental and physical wellbeing.

Children take the lead, *Oldfield Primary School, Cheshire*

The Oldfield School community has recently started to develop a quiet/sensory/wildlife garden within the school grounds. Ideas have been shared in assemblies and possible options discussed. Children will take the lead in the project. Each class will be responsible for their allocated area within the garden to care for plants and encourage wildlife. Representatives from each class will be elected each year to be involved in planning, planting and evaluating their plot. A number of pupils suggested using unconventional items such as recycled planters. This not only demonstrates the maximising of resources but also shows how the school can help reduce its impact on climate change. This also appeals to staff because planters can be easily managed and returned home for the summer holidays.

A multi-purpose garden area, *Roman Way Academy, Hertfordshire*

Roman Way Academy is a first school for 183 children, nursery aged through to Year 4. We have, for many years, had a run-down nature area but this year we plan to change it from a mass of overgrown shrubs and ivy into a multi-purpose area where children can:

- develop their imagination in a den-building area



- encourage responsibility and pride by growing their own vegetables
- understand environmental issues by building a greenhouse out of plastic bottles
- learn about eco systems and water safety with a larger, purpose-built pond
- acquire fine motor skills by digging and planting
- listen to, and create, their own stories in our story-telling zone.

Creating a beautiful space to just be, *Spotland Primary School, Lancashire*

Our school is a large, urban primary, situated close to the centre of Rochdale. Our pupils come mostly from properties without gardens or yards, namely flats or terraced housing. For many, the only chance to interact with nature and gardening is through the experiences we offer at school. Last year, we took on a huge project to develop a little-used garden area at school and, after much work by staff, children and parent volunteers, our Sensory Garden has taken shape and will provide a valuable space for everyone to enjoy the wonders of nature, gardening and a beautiful space to 'just be'. We are keen to develop the insect population in our garden, and aim to have our own bee colony from Spring 2020. The bees would assist with the pollination of flowers in our garden areas and would add interest for the children, in learning about how the colony works and is cared for by staff.

A sensory haven in the inner city, *St Augustine's CE High School, London*

We would like to create sensory garden for our autistic students, as well as a woodland area, a vegetable patch so we can use the products in cooking classes, and pond area for relaxation. The garden is a 'time out' card for many of our pupils; students with EHCPs visit the garden for a quiet space when needed. Is extremely important as an inner-London school that we have access to the natural environment and wildlife, and we would like to cherish this and do some work around the unused area.

Using local expertise to makeover unloved spaces, *St Nicholas Infant School, Oxfordshire*

We have put together a plan to give a small corner of the school a bit of makeover and make it into a usable space for a gardening-club group or outdoor-class group. There are also a few unloved flower beds in a small but sunny courtyard which are overlooked by classrooms which would be lovely to explore and make use of. We have a number of green-fingered parents who have already offered their time to help with this project. The local Allotment and Garden Society also aims to get more children involved in their annual



produce show. Another parent and I, together with Reception class, helped to dig over an old raised bed and plant some donated shrubs from a local plant nursery. It was so encouraging to see the enthusiasm on the children's faces as they helped us, and got as muddy as possible!

Involving everyone, in and out of school, *Westruther Primary School, Berwickshire*

We are a small school of 34 pupils from 5 to 11 years old. At various times throughout the year all pupils take part in growing, harvesting or eating activities. The committee who wrote this statement are age 10. 'We are the Food for Thought group here at Westruther Primary School. We enjoy growing vegetables and fruit in the Community Garden and vegetable beds. We have harvested and sold the vegetables to our school community and use the money raised to buy new seeds. We regularly cook the produce in school to encourage children to taste different fruit and veg. A couple of years ago we chose to extend our Community Garden so the whole community could access it. We encourage the community to help look after the area and take the produce when ready to harvest.'

Making space for micro-allotments, *Wylie Coyotes Afterschool Club, Wiltshire*

Wylie Coyotes Afterschool Club takes children aged from 3 to 12 before and after school, and all day in the holidays. We are a social enterprise, and as well as running an out-of-school-club we also have a toddler group, a community cafe for parents with young children, and a community larder and library, specialising in books on cooking and gardening. Gardening has always been a really important part of what we do. This year we have a new project which came about after a conversation with a local young mum. She told us how much she would like to grow vegetables and flowers with her young children, but had no space in the tiny garden of her social-housing flat. We looked at our front garden and realized that the children rarely play in it. So we decided to build micro-allotments, which we are offering free to local families with young children. The raised beds are being built out of donated, reclaimed timber. They are deliberately kept small, so that families who are new to gardening will not find it too overwhelming, and if things go wrong they will only go wrong in a limited way! We have had donations from our Parish Council and from local firms to buy a shed to store the tools in. The local gardening club is getting involved too – we are having a seed swop and seedling and tool donation day with their support.