

SUSTAINING SCHOOL GARDENS

SAM WOODHOUSE

Everything we do when creating a school garden teaches 'about' sustainability, but what about sustaining interest in the gardens themselves? Here, Sam looks at sustaining interest in sustainability.

To establish a school garden can be immensely creative for the whole school. The benefits are well-known: health, social interaction, fostering a love of nature and encouraging understanding of the earth, but gardens need maintaining! It is such a sad thing when a school, full of promise and energy, sets up a garden that after only a few years degenerates into a neglected eyesore.

Initiatives, begun with eager enthusiasm, can fade and die; we need to be forgiving to ourselves when they do. Sometimes projects need to disappear before new ideas can emerge, but if a garden is to succeed and thrive in the long term, three crucial ingredients are essential:

- vision (why does it matter?)
- management (who leads and who carries out the work?)
- passion (where is the energy?).

I asked the garden co-ordinators in three schools (all of whom had recently gained their Green Flag Eco-Award) for their wisdom about maintaining their work. Arising from three very different contexts, I received three very different answers, but all three underlined the importance of the three ingredients.

Damers First School

One of several First Schools in a residential area of Dorchester, Damers has 450 pupils aged 4-9 years. Edd Moore, a year 1 class teacher and Eco Co-ordinator, provides the inspiration and leadership for their garden: 'I stumbled across the idea of designing a school garden in 2014. I am passionate about children being actively involved in gardening'. He built a garden in which each class has its own raised bed.

Curriculum objectives lead most of the activities in the garden. Edd realised that the pupils had little understanding about where food came from, other than from supermarkets, so they followed the National Curriculum links from growing to cooking in design and technology. Now, the garden is linked to whole-school global learning projects. Each year group researches and grows plants from their focus country for that year (this includes Kenya, Jamaica, Italy, Mexico/Peru, and

India) and the pupils cook a traditional dish. Most classes also link their gardening work to literacy, maths, science, and design and technology.

Edd sees his role as similar to that of a curriculum leader. 'You do need someone to drive the project,' he says. 'Someone who is passionate, has the enthusiasm and can engage staff to join together. Also, someone who is organised!' Edd plans well ahead, so that all the staff know what to grow, how to do it and how it is linked with the curriculum. 'The majority of staff are happy to work in the garden with their pupils because everything has been provided – except the key elements of sowing, weeding, watering and harvesting.'

To avoid falling into the trap of only one person being the inspiration and manager, other keen gardeners among the staff work with Edd in instructing and giving advice to teachers in their teams. I sensed that Edd provides that most elusive element – passion, which in turn inspires innovative projects. Last year, the whole school collected 1500 plastic water bottles and year 3 pupils, plus helpers, used them to make a working eco-greenhouse (Figure 1). This greenhouse is an inspiration to other Dorset schools.



Figure 1: Damers school garden features the pupil-built eco-greenhouse – made from recycled plastic bottles. Photo © Sam Woodhouse.



Figure 2: Dumpton school garden thrives with the enthusiastic involvement of the pupils on a daily basis. Photo © Dumpton Prep School.

Dumpton Prep School

An independent day school in a rural area near to Wimborne, Dumpton Prep School has 340 pupils aged 2 to 13. For over ten years Dumpton School has run an impressive allotment, which provides an outdoor laboratory for science topics throughout the school. It is also the focus for an extraordinary number of pupil-centred and pupil-run growing projects. As many as 60 pupils descend on the area each day, often in their free time, working in groups, and the results are impressive crops of anything from pumpkins to sunflowers.

One motivation is competition. The Head teacher says: 'Children are naturally competitive, and will rise to any challenge, whether it is growing the longest, the biggest or the tallest... for example the year 3 Potato Challenge. Each pupil is given one seed potato and, in groups of three, pupils weigh their potato, plant it in a raised tyre and tend it. At harvest time comes the weighing of produce, and pupils calculate of the percentage increase in mass!'

The Head teacher, the head of science, a science technician and a team of year 8 pupils manage the allotments. Here are the clues to success: first, the head teacher who abounds with enthusiasm for the allotment and all the environmental projects. Second, cascading from this, the enthusiastic involvement of pupils participating in the day-to-day tasks (Figure 2) and with freedom to use the space as an enterprise arena. Senior pupils act as role-models and supervision is provided by staff members at lunchtimes. Across the school the enthusiasm for the allotments has spread, along with recognition of their potential. The passion for gardening has become a shared one.

The passion is not fuelled just by a desire to compete, the Head teacher says: 'Gardening in schools requires a slow gathering of momentum. In our connected world everything is a simple click away, and pupils like to see instant results.

However, they also have a natural interest in the living world and enjoy digging, weeding, planting and harvesting together, learning along the way that patience and hard-work will eventually bring rewards. Commitment to the cause is vital, come fair weather or foul, as there will be plenty of the latter'.

St Mary's C of E Primary School

St Mary's Primary School in Bridport is part of the Skilling housing estate, an area with multiple social issues including high unemployment, isolation, poor diet and high levels of obesity. The school has 170 pupils, aged 4 to 11.

Two inspirational community projects work here, Transition Town Bridport and HOME in Bridport (see web panel). Both recognise the need for education on the importance of food in children's upbringing, so in 2014, working with the school, they set up the 'edible garden' to improve the health, well-being and behaviour of the pupils, with benefits for the whole estate.

Now, a whole outdoor learning and food production area has been established. Two polytunnels and raised beds provide a vegetable box each week to the school kitchen team, with hot meals from scratch and a salad bar for 96% of the pupils (those entitled to free school meals) replacing the previous warmed-up frozen meals. Cookery classes are offered to pupils and parents, and teamwork provides nurture sessions. Pupils with behavioural conditions find the gardening therapeutic. A weekly gardening session welcomes parents, grandparents and friends, who are rewarded with fresh produce to take home. In addition, regular social events are held in which people cook together on the cob oven, so families who might otherwise never meet mix together.

Vision and passion permeate this whole project, and a local retired teacher, Sarah, the garden co-ordinator, helps to sustain it. From the outset, a managing group was set up; it has worked hard to establish trust within the school and local community. They raise considerable

funds – most recently, via a crowd-funded project to employ two local gardeners for three hours a week each. Volunteers help with the growing of food as the school and estate community have slowly become involved. The project has had an unexpected benefit: the outstanding school is so popular with parents that two classes have now become oversubscribed!

Visions for now and the future

We can learn from these three schools that:

- although the visions differ, all three go beyond the garden itself, enabling pupils to learn and look outwards to a wider social context. What they have all done is to be clear about their vision, and have shared it – with colleagues, parents and the local community. People get excited by a vision.
- shared management is crucial. In each case there is one lead, but that person has created a team, with good support from the SMT. The advice is well-known but easy to ignore: do not even begin if there is only one enthusiast!
- passion is the key! Skills can be learned, but the passion to make the vision work is crucial. If gardening is merely an 'ought', it will run out of steam and will not be sustainable. In which case it might be better to take pupils to local gardens and talk to gardeners. Celebrate their work – that way the passion just might be kindled.

If, right now, you can recognise that the potential vision, management and passion are there in your school, go for it! It will be immensely worthwhile.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Edd Moore of Damers First School, Andrew Browning of Dumpton School, and Sarah Wilberforce of St Mary's Bridport for their contributions and their inspiration.



WEB RESOURCES

HOME: <http://home-in-bridport.weebly.com/>

Transition Town Bridport: <http://www.transitiontownbridport.co.uk/content/>

Sam Woodhouse is a GA Consultant and passionate gardener! She works informally with schools in Somerset and Dorset to encourage school gardening, is a member of the schools committee of the Dorset Gardens Trust, and runs twilight sessions for Dorset teachers.