

Place Farm Community Primary School, Haverhill

A treasure house in a small space

Ripe raspberries, tayberries, redcurrants and gooseberries gleam temptingly in the compact and well-organised garden in Place Farm's central courtyard. Once dominated by "typical roundabout shrubs" the beds are now brimming with interesting colours, shapes and smells. Lavender and rosemary grow alongside twisted willow and corkscrew hazel, and onions grow among the flowers. The dedicated vegetable beds boast an explosion of chives and some extremely healthy looking potato plants. This year, the children have planted some of the hanging baskets with strawberries and tomatoes.

Process and progress

Four years ago, at the instigation of teaching assistant Jane Kersey, the courtyard was transformed into a place where children could learn to garden. With the support of the head, David Golding, and sweated labour from parents and teachers the grim shrubs were defeated, a gardening club was established among the children and the work of creating the garden began. A wildlife area has also been established within the courtyard and now there is good-natured grumbling from the vegetable gardeners about thistle seeds drifting across into the kitchen garden beds, thus children experience first hand the joys and the arguments about managing land for biodiversity and for crops. The lack of rain and then having too much rain this spring has taught them what it feels like to be dependent on the weather for your food. It brings home to them the reality of what they study in theory about farming life in Ghana.

Reaching children who find curriculum work hard

Some challenging children, who find lessons difficult to engage with, have blossomed as part of the gardening club.

Support and publicity

Parents have given tools and local companies have responded well to appeals for plants and equipment. The Co-op gave the project £100 community award. Gardening club members show their parents round the garden and their activities are kept in the spotlight by featuring regularly in the termly Healthy Schools and Eco Schools Newsletters.



Strawberries in hanging baskets are just a the right height for the headteacher



Jane inspects the redcurrants – grown in among the flowers

Not biting off too much

Jane is sure that one reason for the project's success is that the beds are a manageable size. "Early success is crucial for children's motivation when they take up something new, and you simply can't keep on top of the weed growth if the area is too big."



Eco schools and Suffolk Children's University

Gardening is offered to the Year 3 children as an after school club, recently registered with the Suffolk Children's University www.suffolk.gov.uk/EducationAndLearning/SuffolkChildrensUniversity/. "We realised it makes much better sense to involve the children in their penultimate rather than their last year at school because they are still here to see what's going on in the garden a year after their period of working on it".

The gardening has been a key element of the school's achievement of the silver award in the Eco Schools scheme.

Plants for sale are snapped up like hot cakes

The gardening club's sale of young runner beans, tomatoes, pumpkins and rosemary plants which they had grown, proved very popular and raised much more money than expected. The £30 income has paid for more seeds, compost and tools.

Parents stagger to school with pumpkins in prams

Young pumpkin plants, grown by the gardening club are sold to the other children for 20p for them to take home to grow competitively. There is a massive weigh-in in October of pumpkins ranging in size from large tennis balls to fruits which have to be brought in by pram!

Eating what you've grown

The school cook takes an active part in the project. Last year she demonstrated to the gardening club how to prepare their courgettes and marrows for cooking, and when the potatoes were harvested she served them up in four different, tasty ways as mashed potato, cheese and potato pie, wedges and boiled new potatoes. The gooseberries, too, disappeared quickly in the form of gooseberry crumble.



Children learn how to prepare a marrow and try their hands at pickling beetroot



All-weather gardeners

The 11 or so children who form the back bone of the gardening club are not put off by bad weather, but if it pours with rain they spend the club time indoors making labels on the computers or using gardening-related websites such as the potato council's site.



The school has joined the Royal Horticultural Society (free for schools) and the children enjoy looking at the monthly magazine.

Surprises

- How much money we raised from selling plants.
- How many children really didn't know that chips come from potatoes
- Many of the children like the strong tastes of some herbs – several have club meetings chewing a chive leaf



Proud of their seriously good vegetables



David Golding, Head
Jane Kersey, Teaching assistant