

GROWING potential

Paola Guzman from the Capital Growth campaign introduces an award-winning vegetable garden that is both helping children get closer to nature and improving their diet...

Last year, Capital Growth ran its ABSeed competition, which aims to find the best food-growing spaces in nurseries, primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities. The competition was a huge success, and uncovered some amazing projects from all kinds of educational institutions.

One of the most amazing entrants was the vegetable garden at Rowland Hill Nursery School and Children's Centre. The nursery is located in a deprived area of Haringey, and children that attend generally have no access to green space. The community garden enables them to interact with nature, which brings great benefits to their physical development. Young children are very curious to learn about the environment that surrounds them, and being in the garden provides the opportunity to explore different smells, senses and tastes. The garden also encourages physical activity, which is fundamental in the development of movement skills. Unlike sport and physical activity programmes designed for older children, a food-growing garden encourages babies and toddlers to make simple movements like crawling, lifting and digging which can improve their agility, balance and coordination.

As well as getting them moving, the garden at Rowland Hill has introduced pupils to good food – an essential development, given the British Medical Association's prediction that by



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The Capital Growth campaign is aiming to support 2,012 new community food-growing spaces in London by the end of 2012. It has been working with nurseries, primary and secondary schools since 2009, and provides training for teachers, events, competitions, access to volunteers, newsletters and funding. Its next funding round closes on January 16th, 2012, and nurseries are welcome to apply. Visit capitalgrowth.org



2020 over a quarter of children will be obese, and that children will have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Growing food at nursery helps young children understand what good food is, how it grows, and that it tastes delicious. At Rowland Hill this is definitely the case; staff have reported that pupils are definitely eating more fruit and vegetables.

Added to this is the sense of community spirit which has resulted from the garden. Children, parents, staff and the local community get together every Friday to weed, sow seeds, harvest and water the plants. The time is used by parents to connect with their children, and the nursery has also organised events where parents and staff have cooked the food grown in the garden. Thanks to their great work Rowland Hill Nursery won the ABSeed's 'Best Nursery Edible Garden' in 2011.

Do it yourself

Why not create your own food growing space?

Where to do it

- In order to identify a space at the nursery to grow food, consider the following:
- Does the nursery have a patch of grass? Or an unused space with a small hard surface? Food can be grown on both. Think about using raised beds, tyres, sinks, grow bags, window

According to the 'Every school a food growing school' report coordinated by The Children's Food Campaign, growing food in an educational setting teaches children enterprise skills. The pupils at Rowland Hill have sold produce to their parents and the local community, raising funds to maintain the garden.

boxes and hanging baskets.

■ You will also want to think about sunlight. Plants thrive in sunny spots; perhaps in the building you operate there is a sunny wall or spot? However, if the site you have found gets sun for only three to six hours a day there are plenty of plants that will be happy with just that. A good rule to remember is that if you grow a plant for the fruit or the root, it needs full sun. If you grow it for the leaves, stems, or buds, a little shade will be fine.

■ Once your garden is up and running you will need trowels, rakes, watering cans, etc. Make sure at this planning stage you set aside a place to store tools.

■ Finally, consider access to water. Plants get very thirsty, especially in the summer, so having easy access to a water butt can make the job of watering much easier. Children love to water plants, so consider having water that can be accessed by them easily as well.

How to build it

Parents, staff and the local community can be heavily involved at this stage. Once you have decided how the vegetables are going to grow (i.e. in containers, raised beds, or on the ground) and how you are going to layout the food-growing garden, organise a work day. This day should be a fun event where staff, parents and the community get together to help you build the nursery's garden. It is important that you are clear on what you want built, have the materials needed to do so, and carry the necessary health and safety assessments. Encourage people to bring food to share, and even play music to make the task more pleasant. If you are a Capital Growth

space you can find volunteers through our online map or find them through our Big Dig day in March.

What to plant

This is the most exciting part of planning a food-growing garden, because you can ask yourself 'what is my favourite meal?', or, 'what are the children's favourite meals?' Even if the children's response is 'chips', you can grow potatoes. Garden Organic, the national charity for organic growing, has a list of the 10 easiest vegetables to grow and handy 'Growing Cards' – quick-reference instructions with all the information you need to start growing vegetables, fruit, herbs, edible flowers and green manures.

When and how to harvest

Information on how to harvest can be found in the Garden Organic Growing Cards. There are also many food-growing calendars that will tell you when to sow and harvest. Most fruits and vegetables are harvested throughout the summer and the beginning of autumn. Usually communities get together in the autumn and organise harvest festivals. You may want to think about saving some of the produce and organise one yourself, involving parents, staff and the community in the festival.

More resources

Garden Organic
gardenorganic.org

Growing Schools
thegrowingschoolsgarden.org.uk

RHS campaign for school gardening
apps.rhs.org.uk/schoolgardening

Every school a food growing school report
sustainweb.org/publications