



When Vanessa Warn decided to set up her nursery, she was determined it would be a totally organic and sustainably sourced operation, as *TN* found out...

# GOING *green!*

**T**he best early years settings help foster both an appreciation of the great outdoors and the importance of healthy eating in their children, but for some a well-provisioned garden area and generous portions of fruit and veg aren't quite enough. A case in point is Little Green Rascals near York – the only organic day nursery in the North of England, and a recipient of the Soil Association's Food For Life Gold Award Catering Mark.

"As soon as I made the decision to open a nursery, I knew that I wanted it to be completely organic," owner Vanessa Warn explains. "I've always been open to ways of doing things differently, and had researched organic food whilst retraining to be a

homoeopath, so the idea was to translate my own philosophy to a larger scale – one with lots of children instead of just my own three!"

Appropriately enough, the site Vanessa chose for her nursery was a farmhouse, 200 years-old and blessed with both an abundance of outdoor space. But preparing it for life as an early years setting presented its own challenges. "Our ethos from start to finish was not to compromise on anything, to make sure we got things that were sustainably sourced – right down to our uniforms," says Vanessa. "But it was difficult, because as there were a lot of things that needed replacing or changing to meet the needs of the nursery, there was always that dilemma of how to do things, what to use and where to get it from. It

was really important to us so we persevered, and we're really proud of the result."

Even before work had started, Vanessa had also hit a stumbling block in her plan to get an official stamp of approval from the Soil Association. "I talked to them about how accreditation would come about, how we'd be inspected, and how long we'd have to be open for," Vanessa explains, "and it soon came to light that to receive full certification, anything we grew in our kitchen garden would have to be cultivated to Soil Association standards, which takes about two years.

"So we had the dilemma of whether or not to eat anything from the kitchen garden at nursery," she continues, "because it was very important to us to allow the children to plant the seeds and see them grow. We decided that that wasn't really going to work, so the Soil Association suggested the Food for Life Catering Mark instead – which I think at the time was only just kicking off – and we decided to go for it."

Although the Catering Mark also comes in bronze and silver, Little Green Rascals wanted nothing less than gold, and following their first



**I wanted to support local companies, to make sure that things were sourced locally, to use local builders, and to try and reclaim and reuse materials**

**VANESSA WARN, OWNER, LITTLE GREEN RASCALS**





dedicated when you're starting out. But once you've found your suppliers, and built relationships with them, they'll support you whatever your needs are. I have a farm that gives us all of our fruit and veg, another place that supplies all of our meat, and for our dry ingredients I go to a variety of distributors and wholesalers.

"In terms of costs, I don't think it's any more expensive than the alternatives, but you do need to be organised. The only caveat is that you have to bulk order, so the initial outlay can be a little more, but if you can plan your menus properly – all of ours are nutritionally based – you can manage it well. It does so much for the environment, local businesses and the children, so it's definitely worth the effort."

With Soil Association and Investors in People accreditation in the bag, and a local business award to show for her and her team's efforts, Vanessa has turned her attention to possible expansion and ensuring her first nursery's practice is the very best it can be. "We've grown quite quickly," she explains, "so now it's about taking stock of what we're doing and looking at everything in great detail. I'm passionate about sustainability and organic and such like, but the bottom line is that I want these children to have the very best start in life, to have a fantastic day, to go home shattered and happy... and usually quite muddy too!"

## Nature studies

**"Rather than specifically explaining what 'organic' is to the children, we discuss how the animals, plants and soil are looked after," explains Vanessa. "When they go out into the garden we talk about it being completely natural, or if we find a worm or flies on the food about how we're going to manage that rather than using pesticides. I think for the children the important thing is knowing where that food comes from and how it's grown.**

**"We also look at recycling and composting; they're very aware of that. It's been interesting – there's so much pester power that, as we've discussed things at the nursery, we've had parents tell us that their children have asked them 'Where's our recycling bin?' or 'Where does our compost go?'. A few people have even been dragged out to our forest school to see the outside loo or find base camp!**

**"We're outside for a major part of the day at the nursery, and we're lucky enough to be next door to York Maze, too, so a trip out for us is just to pop over and let the children wander about their grounds, seeing the animals and using their climbing frames, which they love!"**

inspection, that's exactly what the nursery received. "It took a while to get everything in place," admits Vanessa. "The inspection itself is only a day, but you have to have everything in order before that; they check all of your purchasing certificates and receipts, to make

sure all your suppliers' have the right credentials. Every single ingredient in your kitchen and larder and storeroom is checked. It was quite stressful, but the inspector was fantastic and very supportive – those who do need to improve upon certain aspects are given time, but thankfully we knew that we'd passed on the day, which was a real cause for celebration."

## find out more

For more information on the Soil Association's Catering Marks, visit [www.soilassociation.org](http://www.soilassociation.org). For more details on what children at Little Green Rascals are getting up to, head to [littlegreenrascals.co.uk](http://littlegreenrascals.co.uk)

## Taking the plunge

For any early years setting considering following in Little Green Rascals' footsteps, two questions likely to spring to mind are 'How difficult is it to go organic?' and 'How much does it cost?'. "There's quite a lot of work involved in sourcing organic food and ingredients in the first instance," says Vanessa, "so you need to be quite