SOWING THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

For primary school teacher, Mick Bourke, engaging students in learning about Kitchen Garden activities and sustainability is one of the highlights of his job.

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TESS HOLDERNESS

Mick Bourke can trace his early interest in gardening back to his childhood, recalling time spent helping out his parents in their home garden. This early interest was initially sparked by being ‘hands on’ and was further nurtured through observing how different plants grew and developed over time, from seed and seedling to flower or harvest. While most plants flourished, inevitably a few “failed to fire”, resulting in plenty of learning opportunities along the way.

What started out as a simple enjoyment of gardening evolved into a love of nature, an appreciation for the environment and an interest in how we can live more sustainably. Not to mention influencing a path of study and inspiring a teaching career! The key interests in Mick’s life – teaching, gardening, cooking and sustainability – have all come together, like pieces of a jigsaw, in his current role as an educator.

As a grade 3/4 teacher at Preshil, the Margaret Lyttle Memorial School, an independent school in Kew, Victoria, Mick enjoys running weekly Kitchen Garden sessions with the children in his class. It reminds him of when he first picked up a hand trowel and took those first tentative steps on his own gardening journey, when he was a similar age.

Mick Bourke, keen gardener and grade 3/4 teacher at Preshil.
Mick says that some of the students take to gardening like ducks to water and are keen to further develop their skills. A few regularly help out in their own backyards and have already developed an interest in food gardening. But for others, this is completely new ground – especially for those who live in townhouses or apartments.

“It’s very satisfying to see kids who may not have been exposed to this sort of thing, starting to develop a real interest,” Mick explains. “And as with teaching more generally, it’s great to see children develop new skills and confidence in their own abilities.”

Gardening can be a bit daunting for those who are new to it and there can be a fear of “not getting it right”. But Mick points out that it’s good to get kids involved in just “having a go” and seeing what happens. Such ‘hands on’ aspects are tangible and real – offering an important counterbalance to life in such a virtual, technological world.

Mick really enjoys being out in the garden and teaching kids about the needs of plants or how to create healthy soil. Together, with the help of volunteer parents, students learn how to plan a garden and grow plants from seed, nurturing them along in the little greenhouse before planting them out and caring for them, in specially prepared garden beds.

“It’s great for children to be digging in the dirt and outdoors but to actually be working towards something as well. It’s not just a ‘play thing’, it is a productive activity that they can get a lot out of,” he points out. “It’s also about getting the kids to think about where their food comes from and encouraging them to make good food choices. For example, there’s been a natural shift from eating white bread, to multigrain or sourdough. Food awareness is increasing and there is a willingness to try new things.”

Good Foundations

In the school’s vegetable gardens, Mick regards good soil as a key ingredient to success. Soils are enriched with well rotted down manures (compliments of a farm near his parents’ house), composted food scraps and organic garden waste. This is enhanced with what the kids call “worm wee fertiliser” from the worm farm and regular doses of organic seaweed fertiliser. Topped off, after planting, with straw from the school’s rabbit and duck enclosures - which also serves as a top layer of mulch to protect the soil and conserve water. The end result is a potent power boost for growing plants.

Many vegetable plants need to complete their whole life cycle within one growing season, so providing this nutrient rich assistance really helps them along their way. Mick’s ‘magic manure mix’ is a cost-effective way of creating good soil and by extension, healthy plants and a good harvest. Recycling and resourcefulness are all part of Mick’s mantra! This innovative approach to minimising waste and ‘repurposing’ is certainly something that he applies on the home front as well.

Home Grown

Nine months ago, Mick moved in to a new home in Frankston, an hour’s drive from Melbourne, with his wife Clare, and their three year old son, Henry. After living in an inner urban apartment, the prospect of having their own house and garden was really appealing. Beneath the knee high couch grass out the back, lay a blank canvas! After extensively clearing the site, they have been busy building raised garden beds and creating a series of vegie gardens, as well as planting a range of hardy indigenous plants to suit the seaside, bushland climate and soils.

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have been used to create makeshift ‘water tanks’ to harvest rainwater from the roofs, with simple, gravity fed taps fitted at the bottom for easy access. Discarded hardwood beams, discovered under the house, have become the borders for the vegie beds, along with wood from a relative’s dismantled pagoda. A stockpile of grey pavers, located beneath all the couch grass, have been stacked up to create a really nice border effect for the native garden beds. A huge but inexpensive load of mulch, freshly delivered from a local tree lopper, is currently being distributed. ‘Waste not, want not’, as they say!

“In a throw away world, it’s not all about the new ‘stuff’ that people want and get,” Mick points out. “It’s about using what you already have before you look at going out and getting more. Fortunately, we also live in a real ‘DIY’ world, with lots of ideas and options available via local hardware stores.”

With Mick’s ‘magic manure mix’ now in place in his new garden beds, crops are going in and the garden is really starting to take shape. There is plenty of green space for a young boy to play in and explore, and for the whole family, many happy years of gardening ahead!

Sustainability in Schools

Kitchen Garden and sustainability programs, which are growing in popularity in many schools across Australia, offer plenty of educational opportunities for students. Preshil recently signed up to become a Resource Smart School, as part of a State Government program that links into the Federal Government’s Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (ASSISI). These programs support schools and educators to embed sustainability across the curriculum and into their operations. It is very much a ‘learning by doing’ approach, focusing on key modules that build sustainability knowledge and skills, and encourage schools to take action to minimise waste, save energy and water, promote biodiversity and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Mick Bourke, who studied social and environmental science before becoming a teacher, loves being a part of the journey of exploration that is taking place within his own school community. He welcomes the opportunity to play a role in educating the next generation about the need, as well as the ways and means, to live more sustainably. And he notices that this is something kids are keen to learn more about.

Preshil is currently exploring ‘biodiversity’ and undertaking a landscaping project in an area at the back of the school, affectionately known as ‘The Pines’. The new landscape design will include indigenous plantings and a ‘bush foods’ garden, which the children are really looking forward to co-creating. They are ready to put their gardening skills to good use!