



Green Thumbs

Henderson College is set in fertile country, amongst orchards and vineyards just five kilometres from the Murray River.

It is the ideal setting for a school vegetable garden. The garden began in December 2011 and has already produced abundant crops of asparagus, avocados, broad beans, carrots, edible flowers, eggplants, garlic, Jerusalem artichokes, kale, leek, purple broccoli, strawberries, sugar snap peas and tomatoes – to name just a few.

The garden, in tandem with the College's upgraded kitchen, has also produced some very enthusiastic young gardeners and chefs. Henderson College's primary school students cook up feasts, including asparagus quiche, minestrone, flat breads, focaccias, chapattis, gnocchi, other pastas, and lots of salads ('imagination salads' are very popular amongst the students).

The College, one of 50 Seventh-Day Adventist schools in Australia, saw the theme of food – growing it, cooking it, sharing it – as a way of fostering partnerships, along with teaching about healthy diets.

It is the first Independent school in Victoria to successfully apply for funding through the popular Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, a national program that aims to change the way children approach and think about food.

'The students love the program,' said Cherie Reid, Henderson College's Head of Primary, and Coordinator of the Henderson College Kitchen Garden Program. 'They don't mind getting their hands dirty. Even at lunchtimes some students will be out in the garden, working and some are now building their own kitchen gardens at home, and also cooking meals at home.'

Parents have helped with working bees in the garden and have cooked in the kitchen as 'celebrity chefs'. They are also keen to buy the local – very local – produce.

'It's a real feather in the cap for Henderson College to be the first Victorian Independent school in the Kitchen Garden Program,' said Craig Dunstan, an Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor to Henderson College. 'It's a very rigorous selection process.' (There are over 260 schools across Australia currently in the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, which has been running since 2001.)

Henderson College is a coeducational Prep to Year 10 Seventh-Day Adventist school in Mildura, with just over 130 students.

Challenge: To strengthen the school's connections with the broader community.

Action: Primary school students build a large vegetable garden, via the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program.

Results: In less than 12 months Henderson College begins making connections, and wonderful food.

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– Ms Cherie Reid, Head of Primary and Kitchen Garden Program Coordinator



'The garden at Henderson College provides opportunities for the school and their families to share experiences and be part of a community,' said Mr Dunstan. 'The students have thrived with the hands-on nature of the program. They have been proactive in using their own time to care for the garden and have experienced food and cooking they otherwise wouldn't have tried.'

With four hectares (10 acres) of school grounds, the garden has had plenty of room to expand, even in its first twelve months. It measured 22 metres by 50 metres initially. By September 2012, it was 22 metres by 100 metres.

'We're so lucky to have all this space here,' said Ms Reid, 'plus beautiful soil and plenty of water.'

The garden includes water tanks, raised garden beds, bathtubs, rows and rows of vegetables, and trees. A local orchard donated 23 fruit trees, another donated eight citrus trees. 'Mildura businesses will reduce the cost of items once they know it is for the Kitchen Garden Program,' said Ms Reid. 'We bought, at a discount, wine barrels which, cut in half, can be large pots or small raised gardens.' The program has also benefited from donations of round plastic raised beds and fencing.

Henderson College has been sharing its kitchen garden experiences with nearby government school, Wentworth Public School (which has been part

of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program for three years) and is hoping to compare notes also with another government school, Gol Gol Public School, a recent addition to the program.

The College is looking at possibly forging links with the local TAFE's carpentry, horticulture and hospitality courses.

Meanwhile, there are vegetables to grow and meals to make. Out in the garden the students turn over and fertilise soil, dig in manure, plant seedlings, water plants and make their own individual garden beds. Inside the kitchen they prepare, serve and share meals. They celebrate being together and cooking for each other, learning about different cultures and their cuisines.

Henderson College has a garden specialist, Jody Thomas, and a kitchen specialist, Natasha Faulkhead, whose roles are, with the respective class teachers, to supervise and guide the students.

The program has taken on a life of its own. A third water tank was set to be installed in Term 4, 2012. A chook pen is being built. There are hopes for building a pergola and an outdoor pizza oven. A roadside stall is being mooted.

'The students have really taken ownership and pride in the Kitchen Garden Program,' said Ms Reid. 'They love it.'

