

A BUDDING GREEN THUMB

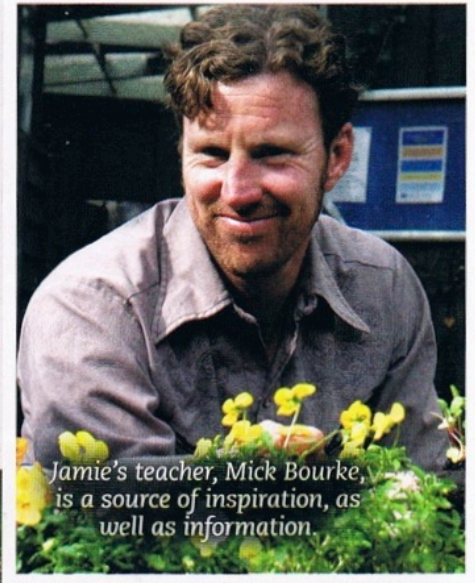
In the previous gardener profile we met a Kitchen Garden teacher ... here, we meet one of the young students who has been inspired to set off on his own gardening adventures.

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TESS HOLDERNESS

At the age of ten, Jamie van Wensveen has already well and truly been bitten by the gardening bug! Watching gardening shows on television, reading books and magazines, and searching online has helped him to learn about what to plant, when and how. But he says the best way to learn has come from watching other gardeners demonstrate what to do, especially his classroom teacher, Mick Bourke.

Jamie had never really done much gardening before he entered Mick's composite class last year and started taking part in the weekly Kitchen Garden sessions. He soon realised that he loved being involved in all of the 'hands on' activities related to planting and growing food for the cooking sessions. Every week the students would check on the tiny seeds they had carefully planted into seed raising mix in the nursery, nurturing them through the seedling stage in preparation for planting outside into a series of raised vegetable garden beds.

"It's really nice to have a garden growing in your school playground and to be able to go out and pick fresh food, like beans, basil and tomatoes to make some yummy things, like Italian bruschetta," says Jamie. "It's been great having a teacher who is a really good cook too because I have learnt how to make some easy recipes, as well as learning how to grow things."



Jamie's teacher, Mick Bourke, is a source of inspiration, as well as information.



Jamie van Wensveen has discovered a natural love of gardening.

New Skills

Jamie's new interests in gardening and cooking have flowed on to the home front, where he has started to help out in the kitchen and make some of the new dishes that he has learnt to create. He enjoys being able to share his new skills – and tasty, healthy food – with the rest of the family. With his parents' help, he has also set up his own little garden along the side of the house.

"Our house was built in the 1930s when cars were much smaller, so our cars don't actually fit up the driveway," Jamie explains. "That was the only place we could find that was safe from my dog and pet rabbit. They both have a habit of digging up and eating the things that we plant in the backyard!"

Jamie learnt how to make a 'No Dig' garden from scratch, setting up a metal frame on the concrete driveway and lining it with wet cardboard, before filling it with alternating layers of mulch, manures, autumn leaves and compost. Finished off with some rich top soil for planting into. Jamie's plants thrived and his confidence as a young gardener grew.



Jamie's father lends a hand in the nursery.



Jamie's mother helps water the school garden.

The leaf of the kangaroo apple resembles a kangaroo paw.



Over the past year, he has grown a whole range of seasonal produce – from sprouts, lettuces, cucumbers and tomatoes, to kale, broccoli, carrots and beans. Along the way he has discovered that broad beans are his favourite vegetable! He has also found that it's possible to grow his favourite fruits at home – summer and autumn berries. The greenery in the driveway has continued to expand, with a series of large pots being added along the fence line. Jamie loves being able to go out and pick fresh strawberries, raspberries and blueberries. And he has even experimented with some more unusual varieties, like the cape gooseberry (*Physalis pruinosa*). Belonging to the Solanaceae or nightshade family, it produces little orange berries that resemble miniature cherry tomatoes. The fruits come individually wrapped in their own little Chinese lantern-like packages – making them a delight for kids to find and open.

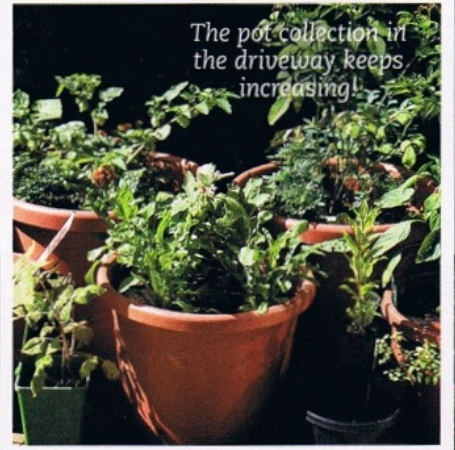


The three J's - Jamie, Jack and Joey - discover a 'J-shaped' bean!

in to an electronic device), his parents obliged. New fences (and high netting to keep stray balls out) were installed and "the vegie patch Mark II" came into being. This new 'work in progress' means more room to grow and experiment!



Drawing ideas and inspiration from beautiful gardens.



The pot collection in the driveway keeps increasing!

A New Patch

A keen 'sportsman', when Jamie is not in the driveway checking on plants or harvesting 'drive-by' snacks, he can often be found out in the backyard kicking balls around. He was constantly retrieving them from what used to be "the vegie patch", long before the arrival of children and pets. His parents had "let it go", giving it up as a losing battle, due to a lack of time to maintain it, and the fact that animals and balls were constantly ending up in there, damaging anything that had been planted

Whenever Jamie went in to collect his balls from what had become known as "the weed patch", he started to notice that some herbs and vegetables, including parsley and silver beet, were still managing to grow there, having 'self-sowed'. He asked if the area could be fenced off for protection and replanting.

Keen to encourage this interest in being outdoors (rather than plugged



Broccoli seedlings growing beautifully in rich soil.



'Sandie' likes to dig up the garden beds.



Jamie likes to photograph the gardens he visits.

Buddha by the back door.



A Healthy Diet

As a coeliac, Jamie needs to be on a strict gluten free diet, with no ingredients derived from wheat, rye, barley or oats. Any accidental consumption causes his immune system to launch an overzealous attack on his digestive system, which can lead to hospitalisation. This medical condition means that Jamie needs to remain very mindful about food ingredients and carefully consider what he puts into his mouth.

The blessing, arising from this increased awareness about food, is that he has developed preferences for healthy, natural types of food, along with a special interest in how food is grown and produced. As he points out, he knows that any food growing in his own backyard is organic and "as fresh as it gets", and it hasn't been sprayed with chemicals like pesticides. "It also tastes better. And there's nothing quite like the experience of picking fresh food, straight off the vine or the plant," he adds.

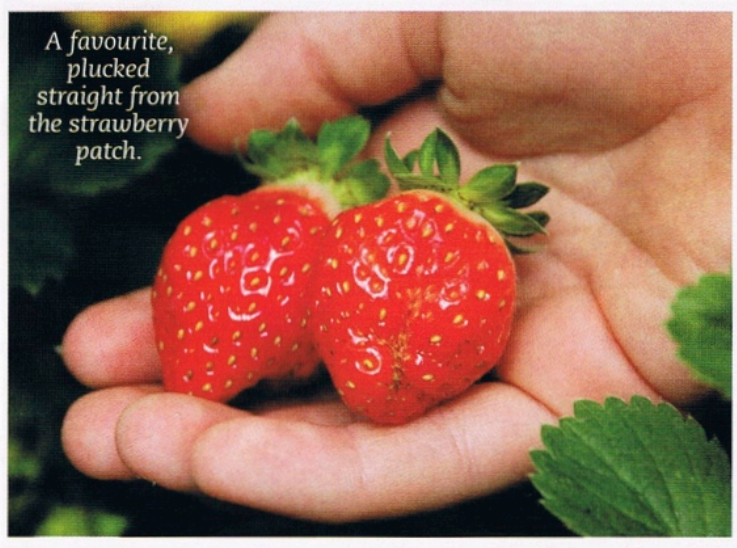
So what advice would this little urban farmer and budding green thumb give to other children? "If you get the chance to garden – do it!" he responds. "It's so interesting to watch the plants growing over time. And the best part is being able to grow and pick the food yourself. It's worth being patient because you are rewarded with delicious food. I didn't realise just how much fun cooking and gardening could be."



'Bugs' – free range bunny (with a voracious appetite).

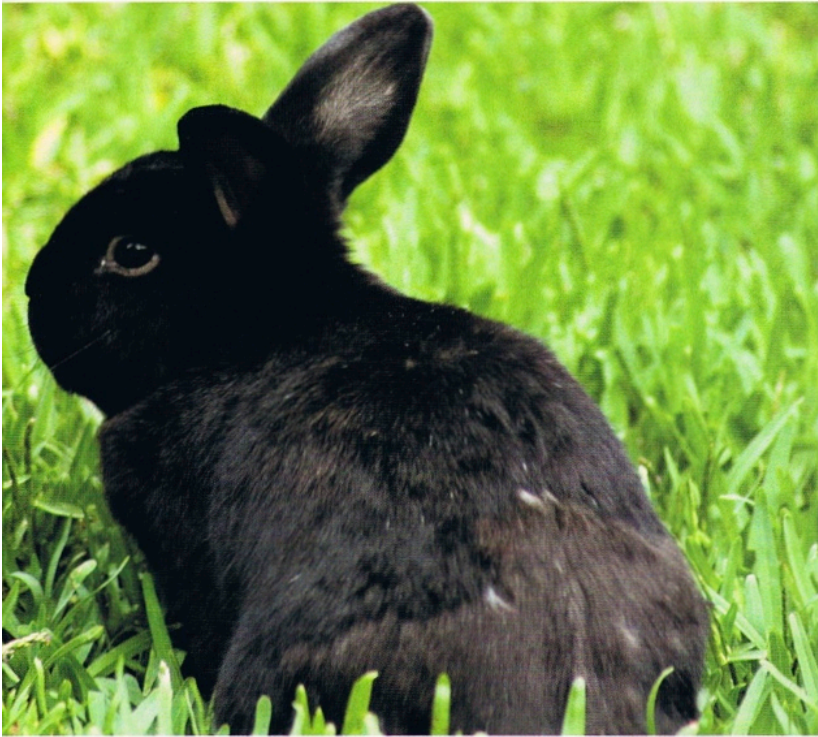


A favourite, plucked straight from the strawberry patch.



Having fun harvesting with Harry.





Exploring 'Bush Foods'

Jamie has been learning about 'bush foods' at school. He and his classmates recently explored an 'Australian' theme in the Kitchen Garden and got to taste test traditional foods, like crocodile and kangaroo meat, with warrigal greens (*Tetragonia tetragonioides*), a native spinach alternative. They really enjoyed the lemon myrtle (*Backhousia citriodora*) tea and also made some wattleseed (caffeine free) 'coffee', from a special variety of *Acacia*.

The students learnt about different bush food varieties – like the lily pilly (*Syzygium smithii*), a common streetscape tree that produces edible purple 'riberries', and the tomato-like 'kangaroo apples' (*Solanum laciniatum*), with leaves resembling the shape of kangaroo paws. The students are now starting to plan the creation of their own bush foods garden at school.



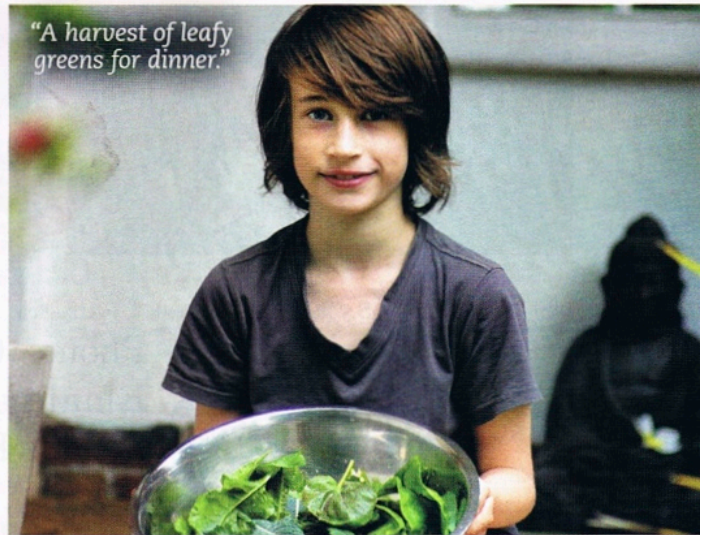
Ripening produce and drying seeds.



Picking a ripe fig in the front yard.



Critters in the garden.



"A harvest of leafy greens for dinner."