

STEPHANIE ALEXANDER - LEADING A REVOLUTION

The inspirational story behind the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program

BY TESS HOLDERNESS

Some of Stephanie Alexander's fondest memories are of cooking by her mother's side. She recalls the wonderful dishes that were created and then shared around the family table, with much laughter and good conversation. Those positive childhood experiences helped Stephanie to develop an early love of good food, not to mention some great culinary skills. They also informed her career choices - resulting in many decades spent as a renowned leader within the hospitality industry. And she remains just as passionate about good food today!

The legacy of Stephanie's childhood not only helped her to establish her own healthy eating habits and a lifelong interest in cooking, it also sowed the early seeds to drive a revolution in food education. Stephanie has become quite an advocate and ambassador, encouraging people to develop positive relationships around food and by extension, to improve their wellbeing.

Inspired by her parents' love and cultivation of fresh produce in their backyard garden, as well as their creation of delicious and nutritious home-made meals, Stephanie has, in turn, gone on to inspire many others - through her groundbreaking restaurants and iconic cookbooks. And over the past 15 years, through her pioneering work with schools via the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program and its associated not-for-profit Foundation.

Drawing on years of experience in hospitality, Stephanie realised that many young people no longer learned to cook at home and some had



Back where it all began - Stephanie Alexander in the kitchen garden at Collingwood College - surrounded by housing commission flats in inner-city Melbourne.



Girls don raincoats in order to keep working in the garden at Weeden Heights Primary School in Victoria.

little experience of the family table. Her cooking 'Bibles' - 'The Cook's Companion' and 'The Kitchen Garden Companion' - have become important additions to many a household bookshelf. These books encourage people to develop the skills and confidence to create beautiful home-cooked food. They invite readers to choose fresh rather than frozen food (and to even cultivate their own produce or pots of herbs), to

buy local rather than long-travelled, and to choose premium rather than tired produce. It all goes towards enhancing the flavour and pure enjoyment of the food experience.

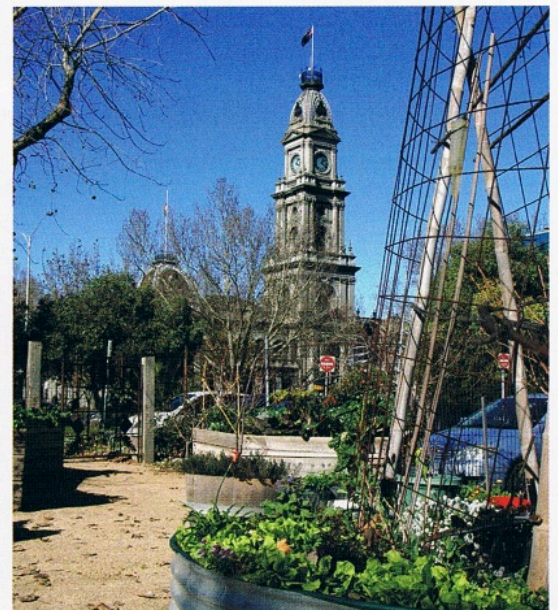
Stephanie has always been happy to share her knowledge and assist others, and she was recently named an Officer of the Order of Australia for her important contribution in the areas of food education and communication. Her Stephanie Alexander Kitchen



Prepping food in a kitchen class at Kilkenny Primary School, South Australia.



Watering the garden, in Margaret River, Western Australia.



The Collingwood Clocktower and Town Hall overlook the demonstration garden at Collingwood College.



Stephanie takes a break and enjoys some morning sunshine in the Collingwood College garden.



Planting and watering in some new seeds, in clay pots made during art classes.

Garden Program, which began with a single pilot project in one Victorian school, back in 2001, has grown into a national program which now involves more than 600 schools and 77,000 schoolchildren. Yet the philosophy and motivation behind it remains quite simple.

“The aim is to educate children all about food, in a hands on way that they can really enjoy. It’s all about encouraging them to try new things and learn new skills,” says Stephanie. “They really appreciate growing things themselves. They know where the food has come from - from the

moment it goes into the soil, right through to harvest and the point where it ends up on their plate. That gives them a tremendous sense of satisfaction and pride in their own abilities,” she says.

Prior to running her highly regarded restaurants and becoming a successful author, Stephanie trained and worked as a school librarian. In some ways, life has come full circle and the various jigsaw pieces, representing different phases of her life, have all interconnected. Stephanie’s earlier experience in education and working with children

has provided a wonderful foundation for her foray into promoting kitchen gardens in schools. Working with a team of researchers and educators, she has developed a range of best practice resources, to support the Kitchen Garden Program and facilitate its ease of integration into the school curriculum.

The program itself has really struck a chord and resonated with school communities, as well as education departments, and it has proven very popular since its inception - with a growing number of schools coming on board every year.



The children were involved in the design and creation of the garden at Collingwood College.



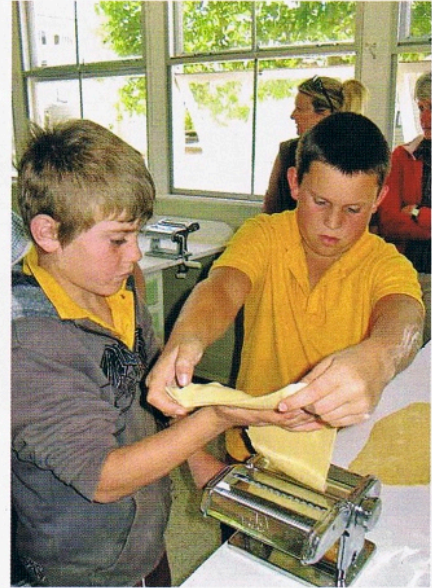
Sampling the soup - as Stephanie chats to one of the volunteers in the background.



Kids in the kitchen - learning new skills and cooking up a storm.



The children really enjoy seeing the plants grow from seed or seedling, to the point of harvest.



Boys learn how to make pasta, in Jandowae, Queensland

From Pilot Project to National Program

"The Kitchen Garden Program connects students with the land, helps them understand what it is to nurture the soil and the seeds they plant in it, to live sustainably and to take responsibility for their own wellbeing."

- Collingwood College

Back where it all began. The seed of an idea came to fruition at Collingwood College, a Prep to Year 12 government school, in inner city Melbourne. When Stephanie Alexander met Basil Natoli, a community gardening advocate, it led on to a meeting with school principal, Francis Laurino. Together, they joined forces to trial a food education program and bring Stephanie's vision of inspiring change around food awareness, skills and behaviour, to life.

In 2001, a garden was created, food was grown and an old home economics kitchen was brought back to life. A driven leader, a team of dedicated staff and volunteers, and a group of enthusiastic students provided the dynamics for the pilot's early success.

Fundraising led to the expansion of the pilot into two additional Victorian schools, and the model of a Kitchen Garden Program was born. With the benefits of such an initiative recognised, and government funding and philanthropic support secured, the program expanded to more than 250 schools. The original model was based on the employment of two part time specialists, in the garden and kitchen, to help run the program within a given school.

From 2012, an additional, more flexible option has also been on offer, based on the training of existing teachers to maintain the program within a school, with volunteer assistance. This has proven to be an affordable and workable alternative for some schools - especially smaller ones and those in regional areas. Today, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program works with more than 600 schools, across all states of Australia.



Stephanie chats with Ben Guest, the gardening teacher at Collingwood College.



The gateway to the Collingwood College Kitchen Garden - a fresh food garden.



Children in grades 3-6 take part in weekly gardening classes at Collingwood College.

In essence, children from participating schools, generally in grades 3 to 6, are involved in regular (often weekly) organic gardening classes, where they get to grow their own food - beautiful, fresh, seasonal produce, in a garden that they have helped to design and create. They then harvest and take that produce into the kitchen and within small teams, in the regular cooking classes, learn to create some simple yet delicious dishes. The culmination of these activities is sitting down and enjoying the food together.



Chickens (and eggs) are a welcome addition to the small orchard adjoining the kitchen garden at Collingwood College.

The mantra of the program is: "Growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing". And these are the skills that are being developed, along with a better understanding about things like sustainability and healthy food choices.

Stephanie's hope has always been for as many children as possible to get the chance to experience both joy and good health from growing, cooking and consuming wonderful food around a shared table. The early evidence indicates that being involved in such activities can really help children to develop positive attitudes



Winter sunshine - Daffodils herald the first signs of Spring about to dawn.



Mulching bananas at Driver Primary School in the Northern Territory.



The iconic red watering can - a symbol of the Kitchen Garden Program.



A young girl dresses some salads, in Sunshine North, Victoria.



An additional demonstration garden exists at Collingwood College, where teachers are trained and fundraiser workshops are held for members of the public.



The children love having chickens at school, at Collingwood College.



Donations helped to fund the creation of the kitchen garden at Orange Anglican Grammar School in New South Wales.

and behaviours towards food, which are likely to stay with them for the rest of their lives.

“The feedback about the program has been wonderful,” Stephanie explains. “It indicates that the children are developing not just important skills but also a sense of pride and self-esteem. If the children are talking about the activities and taking the ideas and recipes home and wanting to try things with their families, then that is a wonderful outcome. The kids are proud of what they are doing at school and want to share this with their parents. We hear back about them starting to develop different habits and make healthy food choices on their own. They have become familiar with fresh, tasty food and have found it to their liking, and they are even capable of preparing it for themselves. To me, that is the real success of the program.”

The Kitchen Garden Program provides a positive model for

educating children about food, at a time of increasing debate and concern over the growing number of overweight and obese children in Australia, and the associated longer term health implications. Stephanie believes much of that simply comes back to a lot of people not really understanding what to do with food. “That can lead to poor choices because they haven’t really been introduced to any other way of being,” she says.

Showing children the alternatives is what motivates Stephanie. In terms of continuing to cultivate awareness about healthy relationships with food and planting the seeds for behavioural change, the food education revolution is set to continue!

For more information about the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program and Foundation, visit www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au.



The gardens and oval add some welcome greenery to the grounds of inner-city Collingwood College

PHOTO CREDITS:

Photos of Stephanie Alexander and Collingwood College by Tess Holderness
Photos of participating schools courtesy of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program