

# Let children go to seed

*A primary that has given its pupils a passion for gardening wants the subject to be compulsory in schools, writes Sian Griffiths*

**E**leven-year-old Jensen Kirk had never tasted beetroot before he grew it in his school allotment. Now it is his favourite vegetable, lightly fried to retain the flavour – the way they do it in his school cookery classes. Kirk, in his final year at Grassmoor Primary School near Chesterfield, Derbyshire, is also partial to tomatoes, rocket and carrots – tastes acquired since he joined the after-school gardening club.

Holly Rogers, 10, Kirk's classmate, loves gardening too. With rhubarb grown in the school allotment, she helped make a rhubarb crumble that all the children ate at lunchtime.

"I wouldn't eat vegetables if I hadn't grown them but they taste much nicer than when you buy them in the shop," she says.

The 220 children at this primary are lucky. Their school field opens onto allotments, and for the past eight years they have been digging, planting and watering fruit, vegetables and flowers every week.

It is all taken so seriously that every year children enter local gardening competitions – and often triumph, even against adults. Andrew Bradley, chairman of governors at Grassmoor, says: "We had a group called the Basketeers, who produced hanging baskets and exhibited them at the

Tatton Park flower show. After that we did a school garden at the show for three years running, on different themes including the Wombles. At the East Midlands in Bloom competition in 2015 the school won a gold medal."

Next month, at the annual conference of the **Association of Teachers and Lecturers**, the moderate teachers' union, Bradley will propose a motion calling on the government to bring gardening into the curriculum.

"Children need to understand the link between the foods they cook and where the foods came from," he says. "They need to learn about healthy foods, and we have seen that when they grow these foods themselves, they are much more likely to eat them."

If ministers agree to make gardening compulsory at least in primary schools, it will crown a long campaign by chefs and celebrity gardeners as well as teachers.

Cookery became a compulsory part of the curriculum in 2014 after being backed by the television chef Jamie Oliver, in a campaign later taken up by the restaurateurs John Vincent and Henry Dimbleby, founders of the Leon chain. Oliver, who has funded a swathe of kitchen gardens and gardening resources in England's schools, has also

called for gardening lessons to be part of the school timetable.

The TV gardener Alan Titchmarsh likewise supports the move. "It's desperately important we get gardening lessons onto the national curriculum," he told the crowd at the Ideal Home

Show earlier this year.

The restaurateur Raymond Blanc agrees. Eighteen months ago, Blanc called on Michael Gove, then education secretary, to extend his plans to make cooking classes compulsory.

"We have a wonderful opportunity to truly reconnect with food," he said. "We need to engage with the outside world, with our gardens and the life within them. Children need to learn the simple magic of taking food from the seed, from the earth or from the rivers and then to transform it into something simple and delicious."

This year Bradley hopes that even if gardening isn't made compulsory, head teachers will at least set up after-school gardening clubs for pupils. They do not have to be sophisticated, he insists, adding that children can learn about how plants grow in simple ways.

"We are lucky we have an allotment," says Bradley, "but even in the inner city you can create gardens out of hanging pots, window boxes and living walls."

Children at Grassmoor need no persuading. Nine-year-old Leo Brown mentors "the little ones" (the seven-year-olds) in their school gardening efforts and is determined to continue his hobby when he grows up. At home he is in charge of his family's garden, where he grows strawberries and blueberries (for his sole consumption).

Dylan Sanderson, 8, wants everyone to be given the chance he has had.

"After-school gardening club helps me make friends with other children," he says. "There's just nothing I don't like about it. I think every child should be able to garden at school."

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Barney, Dylan and Chloe, all aged 7, in Grassmoor Primary School's allotment, where pupils have been growing produce for eight years

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