

The Hermites

The Hermitage School gardening group, Chester-le-Street, Co. Durham

Aim

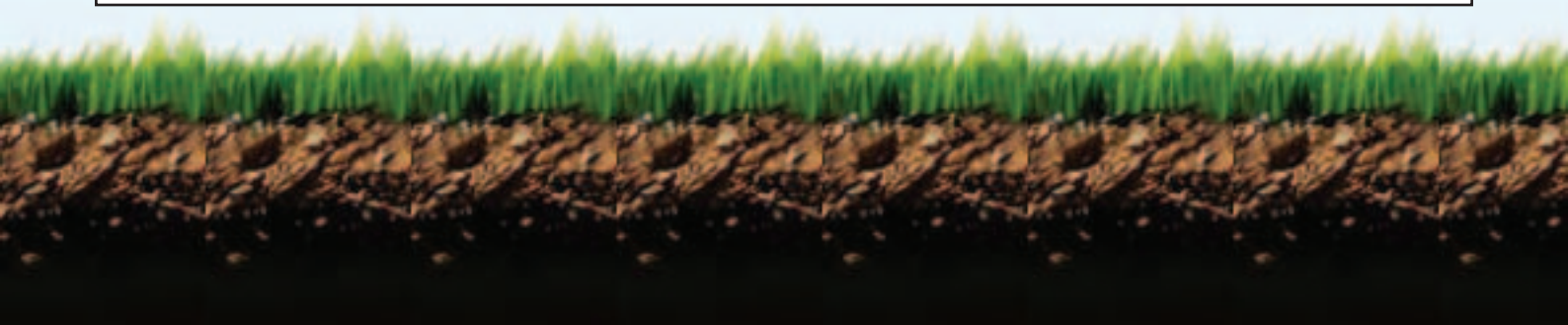
To encourage the students to take an active interest in the origins of the food they eat and how it is produced; as well as sustainable living and the environment that surrounds them.

Action

A survey with the students to see which extra-curricular activities were missing from the school's Extended Services programme, which incidentally coincided with the launch of the Food for Life Flagship status and complemented the school's achievement of National Healthy Schools accreditation.

Outcome

A small section of grass alongside the bike store at school was allocated to the gardening group, and we cut beds out from the turf, established composting bins, put up a fence and are in the process of building a polytunnel.



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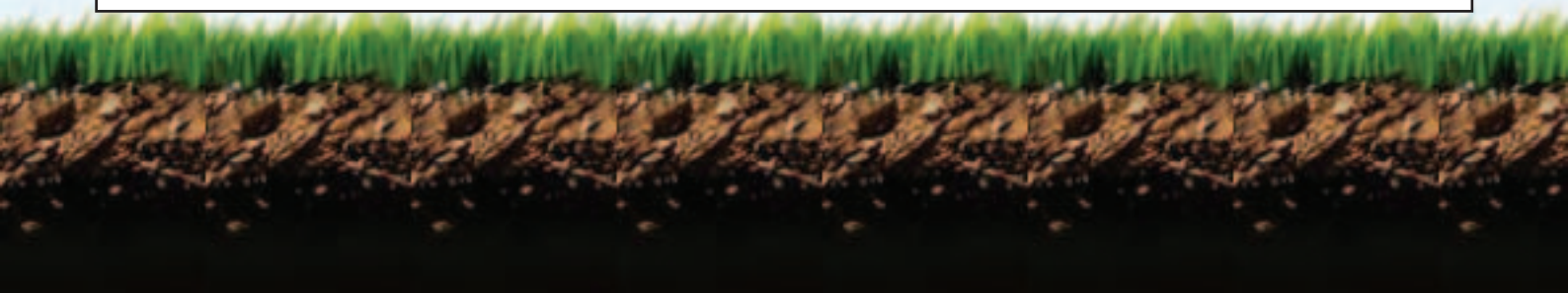


Details:

The gardening group at the Hermitage School is an extra-curricular activity, which takes place on a Friday afternoon. A small group of students have been members of the group since it started in September 2008, and more students from the new Year 7 have joined this year. We have the specialist help of Mr Glassey and Mr Barrass, parents of students at the school, along with the expertise of caretaker Mr Greenwood.

Since 2008, the group has been working on a small piece of land alongside the school, which has been transformed into a garden and vegetable patch from scratch. After the initial creation of beds, composting bins and a fence (funding for this to kick start the project came from Groundworks and the Primary Care Trust), the group began the planting. Garlic, onions and beans went in for early planting, followed by a large selection of vegetables in the spring such as potatoes, parsnips, radishes, a variety of beans, pumpkins, green and purple kale, sprouts, tomatoes, sweetcorn and more. The students put in a great deal of effort in the mean time weeding and watering, to ensure the plants grew to their full potential. Once harvest time was upon us, our school kitchen was over the moon to receive our bountiful crops and use them regularly in the meals produced every day for students in all year groups in the school. Meals included pumpkin soup, vegetable risotto, salads, pumpkin pie, stuffed marrow, grated courgettes in quiche, leek and potato soup, fresh vegetables for the Christmas dinner, roasted vegetables and sautéed red cabbage.

Over the spring and summer months last year, the students also cut out a fruit bed, planted bulbs for spring flowers and created homes for little insects out of old tin cans and hung them from the cherry trees in the garden. We have also had several visits from Food for Life , in



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which the students have discussed wildlife in the garden, and tasted various fruits and vegetables grown in the UK and around the world. Mr Glassey and Mr Barrass were also kind enough to invite the gardening group to their allotment for a visit one afternoon, where we inspected greenhouses and polytunnels; as well as vegetable patches and the local wildlife. We also looked at inspiring ways to grow vegetables to avoid pests, such as growing carrots in a bath!

The allotment visit was organised to give the students an investigative look at polytunnel gardening, as the school has been lucky enough to acquire funding from the Food for Life partnership to buy and build a polytunnel in our own garden. Over the cold winter months, the group have bravely put up the metal shell of the polytunnel and have been wisely constructing the doors inside, to avoid the elements! Whilst indoors, the group have also established a wormery (donated by Scottish and Southern Energy) as a way of sustainable waste disposal. The compost bins are also regularly used by the kitchen to dispose of biodegradable waste.

The summer of 2009 was really busy as we entered the Britain In Bloom competition, run as a pilot for schools. Judges from Northumberland interviewed the students and volunteers and judged the garden. Amazingly we won the Regional Silver Gilt Award and the students collected their award at a special ceremony in September. Other competitions included the county-run growing the tallest sunflower and largest pumpkin.

Also during the summer term, as a flagship school for Food for Life The Hermitage School welcomed the Cooking Bus into its school community. This exciting project engaged a wide range of ages within school and the wider community, including the gardening group, and it complemented the good work already established within the school and the part-time evening course offer for adults. It used innovative and challenging ways to engage young people, their families and wider community in the whole concept of food sourcing, preparation and healthy eating.

Overall, the gardening group at The Hermitage is fantastic – the fact that such a small plot of land and the hard work of but a few dedicated individuals has resulted in so many crops being grown for consumption in our own school kitchen is great. As the polytunnel goes up and the days grow longer, the gardening group hope to create a long-lasting, sustainable garden that will shape students' understanding of their food and where it comes from for years to come.

