

# Choosing to eat good fresh food

Stephanie Alexander

MY IDEA for the past twelve years has been to develop an enjoyable program suitable for all Australian primary schools, with the aim of positively influencing children's attitudes and behaviours about food.

Choosing to eat good fresh food is certainly about health, but it is also about joy and wonder, and about developing a sensual appreciation of the growing world and the turning of the seasons. It is also about respect for quality and craft.

I am not alone in believing that something needs to change. In all of the developed world there is concern about the implications of poor diet on children's health. Programs and papers have proliferated. I think I may be in the minority, however, in my insistence that no program will change behaviour unless it is perceived by the children as enjoyable, and also in my insistence that the garden, the kitchen, and the table all need to be given equal attention.

I see a very clear path from when I first became interested in everything to do with food to where I am today, still passionately interested and now wanting to influence others. My family moved to a large bush block on the Mornington Peninsula when I was nine, where I grew up, went to school, and enjoyed my mother's exceptional cooking until I left home to attend Melbourne University.

Positive modelling is one of the most powerful ways we influence our children. My mother and grandfather took care of the garden, the animals, and the food. My father was the builder, the lover of music and literature. I was sixteen before there was any television. Evenings were spent around a table talking, and after the meal we all shared the task of washing up (no dishwasher), and then we listened to music or to a radio program or we read books.

Every meal would have included some element that had been grown or produced on the property. My mother loved to cook and was very interested in how other cultures prepared their food. Her enthusiasm was very contagious.

The nightly menu was eclectic in its influences. I soon understood that there was always more than one way of preparing something. I grew up taking for granted the existence of a vegetable garden, an orchard, a duck yard, a cow, as well as appreciating the shape of the tea trees and banksias, registering the pleasure my mother derived from a changing arrangement of bowls and treasured bits and pieces that she set out on a special table. She also drew my attention to the splash of a bird in the bird bath, and the special beauty of a branch of a tree illuminated by a flash of sunlight.

I am not here to talk about my life, but my career of more than 30 years as a restaurateur, and my fifteen published cookbooks, have all been about wanting to seduce others to come over to my way of thinking. Fresh seasonal food is the best food there is and you too can have it every day.

The idea that started to firm up around 2000 was a simple one.

Change the way children feel about food, and give them the information and the skills to want to make different and better choices. If good food modelling does not happen at home, what chance has the child got against the power of the advertising dollar?

And so, in 2001, I started the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden project with a team of two — myself and a brilliant assistant — which in 2004 became a not-for-profit foundation, with a growing group of committed team members.

Our philosophy is encapsulated in our logo: Grow.Harvest.Prepare.Share.

All equally important.

We developed a successful model and set about finding financial support for it. Every dollar promised or granted came about as a result of a politician or a bureaucrat or a philanthropist sitting and sharing a meal with a table of eight-year-olds. The model is very persuasive when experienced in action and we are proud that our major supporter is the Australian Government, together with important corporate and philanthropic partners.

Once a kitchen garden program is introduced into a primary school, it demonstrates its effectiveness very rapidly. Within weeks, students develop a willingness to experience new flavours and textures as they work with produce they have helped grow or harvest. It promotes positive social behaviour as children work together cooperatively in small groups, solve problems and share experiences in both the garden and the kitchen. The program is inclusive, regardless of gender, size, ethnic background, or academic ability. Cultural awareness is inbuilt into the activities as students quickly learn that there is always more than one way to do something, just as I did when I was growing up. Bush food plants are grown in many gardens. Chickens are reared and contribute not just eggs, but an understanding of responsibility and care .

Currently, we are supporting two models: the Ideal model and the Flexible model.

In our Ideal model, kitchen and garden classes are given every week for an entire grade, delivered by passionate kitchen and garden specialists, who are paid for by the school.

Typically, these specialists are not teachers. The classroom teacher accompanies the grade to the kitchen and the garden.

There are over 250 schools currently following this model. Twelve years on, we have acknowledged that we need to be flexible if we want to welcome more small schools, rural schools, special schools, remote schools, Indigenous schools and schools with low socio-economic profiles. In the Flexible model we train one or two nominated classroom teachers to take the role of the kitchen and garden educators. More than 150 schools have put their hands up to start with the Flexible model and this number grows by the day. This model encourages schools to start small, to use donated equipment and recycled materials, and to split classes if the available spaces are smaller than the ideal. Almost certainly, some of them will gravitate to the Ideal model as the program becomes more and more valued in their school and school community.

We can now say with pride that any school with a primary curriculum, anywhere in the country, can apply to join the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program (SAKGP). We will train their nominated teachers, and we will support them as they build their first garden beds. We have so many resources available, including a website where they can see and interact with many similar schools. We support teachers at every step of the way, recognising that if it seems too hard, we will lose them.

We acknowledged that the movement would only grow and endure if it was seen to integrate meaningfully with the general curriculum aims.

Therefore, our team commenced the development of outstanding teaching and training resources and activities, both in print and increasingly online. They include Tools for Teachers, Recipes for Literacy (designed for students with special learning needs) and our Implementation manual, as well as a guiding syllabus designed both for temperate climates and

for tropical climates, and *The Shared Table* website with its hundreds of resources available at the click of a mouse.

The Tools for Teachers' series of books are intended as prompts for deliverers of the program. They include a wonderfully diverse range of activities and topics covered.

Some samples:

*A good egg* — Which animals produce eggs and what are they for? Chicken eggs, crocodile eggs, emu eggs [brings in Indigenous links and history]. What happens when heat is applied to the proteins, fats, and minerals in an egg? (Relates to Science, English, History, Indigenous Years 5 & 6)

*Designed to dig* — How do tools in the garden relate to the physics of the human body? Levers, axle and wheel, fulcrum — in wheelbarrow, garden fork and spade. Students compare an Indigenous digging stick to a Korean ho-mi, and to a Dutch hoe. Note differences about size, leverage, potential uses. (Relates to Health, Technologies, Science, Indigenous, Asia, Years 5 & 6)

*Friend or foe* — Awaken students' curiosity about the insects in their garden and to realise that not all insects are pests — links to science understanding and inquiry skills (using tables and graphs to represent data. (Years 3 & 4)

*Pizza party* — Fractions as well as being delicious!

I travel a lot to visit schools. In the past nine months some of the dishes I have enjoyed with the children include:

- sweet potato scones with rosella jam in Darwin
- yabby pizza in Ungarra on the Eyre Peninsula
- magnificent green salad with roasted sunflower seeds at Mansfield in Queensland
- pannacotta with poached cumquats at Foster in Victoria
- kale crisps also in Queensland
- quinoa and chickpea salad also at Mansfield

- broccoli and cauliflower fritters with mint yoghurt dipping sauce from Elwood in Victoria
- empanadas stuffed with greens at Westgarth
- spring risotto of peas and baby carrots at Collingwood
- leek tartlets at Elizabeth Downs in Adelaide
- Reconciliation pizza with warrigal greens from Collingwood in Melbourne
- and dozens and dozens more.

The pride and soaring self-esteem on display in these dining spaces brings tears to my eyes and regularly give me goosebumps.

Our current aim is to have the program represented in 10% of all Australian schools, with a primary curriculum by the end of 2015. We are absolutely on track to achieve this. This will equate to influencing around 100,000 children. I would like to see participating schools embracing fresh seasonal food in all food-related activities, including fetes and special days, fundraising drives, school camps, breakfast programs, canteen menus, and so on.

After 2015 our future is uncertain. If our government adopted pleasurable food education as a compulsory part of every child's education as has just been agreed in the United Kingdom from September 2014 (funded by The Big Lottery Fund and yet to be seen how it will roll out), we would be delighted, and would be happy to work with government to make it happen and to ensure that the essential values are retained and the fun is not ironed out.

We have had two formal evaluations of the program. The first, by Deakin University and the University of Melbourne, examined Victorian schools only. The second was national and was undertaken by University of Wollongong. The findings were all positive and are detailed in full on our website, [kitchengardenfoundation.org.au](http://kitchengardenfoundation.org.au).

The National Evaluation found that participating in SAKGNP has led to greater engagement of children with cooking at home:

- nearly 20% of parents indicated that they prepared more meals at home after their children participated in the program;
- 77.4% of parents indicated their child asked them to make foods that had been made at school as part of the program;
- 71.9% of parents of students reported that their child was more willing to cook at home since the start of the program.

Almost one-third of SAKGNP school parents reported that they worked more often with their child in the home garden since the beginning of the program.

The Foundation office receives countless calls and emails from parents, volunteers and teachers with positive anecdotes. Every time I visit a school I am almost mobbed by parents and teachers and friends of the school, all wanting me to know how meaningful the program is to their school and what a difference it has made to the students.

The team at the SAKGNP is amazing. I have pulled back from the operational side of things, other than visiting schools and lobbying. New connections are happening all the time. One of our team has just returned from Warburton Ranges in the APY (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) lands, with a recruitment of nine schools. There is a cluster of seven remote schools near Kalgoorlie, and our Learning Support team has just worked with six schools that came together at Alice Springs. We have vibrant programs already operating in some amazing places — Coober Pedy, Bourke, Flinders Island, Darwin, as well as many urban and suburban schools.

I urge anyone interested in more detail to go to our website.

I believe, hand on heart, that if every child in Australia could spend time at school growing and harvesting edible plants, caring for chickens, learning to slice, chop and stir, noticing how beautiful fresh food is, and enjoy eating simple, full-flavoured, beautifully presented dishes with their friends, we would be raising a generation who could provide for themselves and their families without anxiety, and would be unmoved by the claims of the peddlers of convenience food most of the time.