

# Growing up

Schoolchildren in a South African township are learning gardening skills that will nourish them for a lifetime

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On a visit to a South African township I had thought myself far from hopeful of finding much of horticultural interest amid the bleak and unrelenting poverty, and certain that there would be nothing of beauty for the pages of *GARDENS ILLUSTRATED*. Later, though, I was reflecting on one of the most stimulating garden visits I've ever made.

We are looking round gardens at schools in the sprawling Mitchell's Plain, 20km south of Cape Town, home to nearly two million people and blighted by poverty, gangsterism and drug addiction. The first is the 750-pupil Northfield school. A couple of parents and a swarm of children tend an immaculate vegetable garden of spinach, leeks, beetroot and onions. A small boy slips his hand into mine and pulls me off to see a plant. "Look at this," he says, puffing out his chest – three foot of pride with dirty knees – "this is our national flower, a king protea. We grew this. When I get here in the morning I come straight here to check it." To squeals of laughter from his friends, he adds: "This place is our Kirstenbosch," referring to Cape town's great botanic gardens (see issue 157). The plant is as scrawny as he is, with one small flower on a weak stem. But, seeing it through his eyes, it is the most beautiful plant I will see in his country.

Greening South African Schools is a project devised by the country's National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), which has developed garden-based teaching programmes for children at primary and secondary levels of education. Schools are closely supported, for three years, to establish their gardens and familiarise themselves with the project's curriculum. The aim of the institute is not simply to establish indigenous, 'water-wise' school and community gardens but to develop gardening skills to a level that will enable local, sustainable food production. Most of all, ▶



The vegetable garden at West End primary school is on a former tarmac playground. Compost made in the school is used to improve the sandy soil.

LEFT The school's Eco club involves boys and girls of all ages.

“ Growing food is important, because hungry children can't learn ”



TOP The project hopes to involve local people in the garden. This sign and others around the garden was made by the caretaker and parents.  
CENTRE Structures in the garden, such as this arch and the bridges in the background, are designed and made in school lessons.  
BOTTOM The project aims to show it's not necessary to own a garden to grow plants: here medicinal plants are grown in a pile of old tyres.

▷ though, by making the garden the centre of school and of community life, the project aims to nurture children in an awareness of the natural world and to develop a sense of their own responsibility towards it.

The garden is used as a classroom to teach about plants, growing food and caring for the environment. The whole school is involved: a path in the shape of an AIDS ribbon has been designed by the art class and laid out in a maths lesson. My guide whispers in my ear, matter-of-factly, that his parents have “passed over” and that the path reminds him of them.

The next school, West End Primary, is a larger one with 1,300 pupils. Beaming members of the gardening club greet us. Each is responsible for part of the garden. There are pools, shaded seating areas and collections of pelargoniums, proteas and succulents. All the plants are indigenous and the children are eager to talk about the importance of protecting native species and preserving resources, especially water.

Used to showing journalists and visitors around the garden, each child speaks confidently about their area. In the garden of medicinal plants my young guide rebukes me for not growing any in my own garden: “This is nature’s pharmacy, handed down by generations, and you have a responsibility to continue growing these plants.”



### Seeds of change

‘Reduce, Recycle, Reuse’ is the club’s slogan, and old tyres, empty bottles, bricks, even a secondhand bath are all put to use in the vegetable garden. Plants are raised in a nursery area and planted out in beds fed with the school’s compost. “Growing food is important,” says the boy, showing me the vegetable plot, “because hungry children can’t learn.” Any surplus vegetables contribute to feeding schemes for the poorest children.

The realisation strikes me that gardening is vital to the children and their families: it’s a source of food, pride and, most of all, beauty. In Britain we tend not to speak about the delights our gardening brings to us. I am inspired by the confidence and joy with which these young people openly celebrate the significance of their gardens.

As we are leaving, a timid girl plucks up the courage to ask me about England. “The school gardens must be very beautiful there,” she says. “No,” I tell her, “not every school has a garden.” “That’s awful,” she replies. “A garden is beautiful and valuable. Those poor children in England.” □

• For more information about SANBI’s work visit [www.sanbi.org](http://www.sanbi.org)

TOP The garden extends throughout the school, around classrooms and surrounding playgrounds.

ABOVE One of the school’s teachers, Mrs Murphy, inspects a child’s crop of carrots. The nasturtiums attract insect pests away from other vegetables are also edible.



A group of boys get the plum job of cleaning out one of the garden’s ponds.  
ABOVE All the plants grown in the garden are native to South Africa, including these restios and heathers.

**BBC** Children’s channel CBeebies is offering free packs of vegetable seeds to parents and guardians in the UK. [www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/digin/apply\\_for\\_seeds/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/digin/apply_for_seeds/)