

SCHOOL GARDENING

Growing for the future,
because we *have* to!

We talk to RHS School Gardening Champion of the Year Matt Willer

Winning the Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) School Gardening Champion of the Year award for 2018 was a great moment in my life. It is one of many amazing chapters in the story of The Allotment Project, a school and community garden that I helped create back in 2015 at Reepham High School and College in Norfolk.

What inspired you to start The Allotment Project for children and young people at your school? There was not one sole reason that inspired me, but, instead, many contributing factors that led me towards my ambition to create a school allotment for children and young people. From going to a secondary school that had a working farm attached to being an allotment holder in Norwich to my time working in rural Uganda and travelling around Cuba where, in both nations, local people grow their own food as a vital necessity, all experiences played a major role in motivating me. Also, as a teacher, I absolutely refuse to accept that I am just employed to help young people pass their exams. Of course grades are important, this goes without saying, but going to school should also be about teaching children and young people about life, and understanding where food comes from should absolutely be part of every child's educational experience. This was a chief motivating factor for me because I staunchly believe that a better, more sustainable world, can be created by growing our own food locally to where we live and work.

Why do you think it is very important for children and young people to learn how to grow their own produce? It's really simple; there is no ambiguity: it is absolutely about helping to create a better, more sustainable, more environmentally friendly world. We live in a world that is grossly and embarrassingly unsustainable and that will derail the planet if we are not wise and more conscientious towards the environment. Growing food locally to where we live and work is, for obvious reasons, far better for the

environment as there is virtually no carbon footprint involved. When I started to build The Allotment Project at the school I knew that what the children and young people would grow would be absolutely organic and would take five minutes to deliver to the school canteen for cooking. They would therefore understand exactly where their food has come from because *they* grew it!

I strongly believe that volunteering at The Allotment Project teaches children and young people key life skills. Problem solving, being patient, and working as a team are all part of being involved with The Allotment Project. Children and young people are always made to feel genuinely valued in that it is *their* Allotment Project along with everybody else. Students learn social skills and hopefully become enriched by spending time with other human beings from our parent and community volunteers to their own peers; The Allotment Project is a very social place! Also, in regards to mental health and well-being, it is extremely important for students to escape the indoor classroom and go outside.

When did I become a keen gardener? Although my childhood was spent in the garden, climbing trees and building dens, I really took to growing my own food after finishing university when I had an allotment in

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Norwich. I enjoyed the communal spirit and how unpretentious people were in helping each other to grow food. Working on an allotment, I feel, is a very genuine human experience and I quickly realised that from aiding well-being to producing sustainably grown food, only good things can come from having an allotment. I just wanted to bring this ethos and life attitude to the school that I work at. Although I am teaching children and young people about how to grow their own food, I would, however, not regard myself as an expert gardener. I have long had the mind-set that we, as human beings, are always learning and improving. In this sense, I very much continue to enjoy learning from others who know more than me or by having a quiet relaxing read (if I have the time!).

When I do find 'learning time' for myself, I absolutely thrive on learning about the inspirational ideas of permaculture (www.permaculture.org.uk) and frequently use the three key permaculture principles of 'Earth Care, People Care and Fair Share' in how I grow food at home and at The Allotment Project. We use so many permaculture ideas all the time! For example, we use wood bark or rotten hay, as a mulch around our plants to lock in moisture and secondly to keep unwanted weeds at bay. Another example would be our 'companion planting' around our young fruit trees. We plant nitrogen fixing plants to grow with our fruit trees. They essentially add nutrients to the soil and the worms take this goodness down to the roots below. It really works and we have seen a dramatic increase in our yields! I would strongly recommend permaculture to anyone who is keen on growing

Matt Willer & The Allotment Project's accolades:

- Royal Horticultural Society's School Gardening Champion of the Year (2018)
- Winner of the Norwich and Norfolk 'Eco Hero' award
- The Allotment Project has won, for two years running, the eco-secondary school category at the annual Norwich and Norfolk Eco Awards (2017-18 & 2018-19).

their own food in way that is very much entwined with the nature.

What plans do you have going forward? Work at The Allotment Project, in regards to development, will hopefully be finished by the summer of 2019. It has taken four amazing, yet very challenging years, to get to where we are now. However, as an individual, I will certainly not be putting my feet up! I plan, with enormous energy and determination to have a go at replicating The Allotment Project in other secondary schools across Norfolk for the very same reasons I started the project at Reepham High School.

■ Find out more about The Allotment Project at www.reephamhigh.com/our-school/allotment-project

This year's RHS School Gardeners of the Year competition winners will be announced in June. Schools and youth groups can sign up to the RHS Campaign for School Gardening at <https://schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk>



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