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Farm My School FEEDING THE FUTURE

WORDS BY HEATHER GALLAGHER PHOTOS BY LUKE ADAMS & FIONA CADOREL

Farm My School is an initiative aiming to transform unused land within schools into regenerative market gardens, to grow community, educate youth and produce affordable nutrient-dense food.

Two men with a vision have built a farm at a secondary school in regional Victoria. Created on a 1.5-acre disused soccer field at Bellarine Secondary College (BSC) in October 2022, the farm was established by local community members in a record 24-hour period.

It's the pilot project of a newly launched initiative called Farm My School (FMS), which is the brainchild of permaculturists Ben Shaw and James McLennan. The pair partnered with the school community and Bellarine Community Health to bring their plan to life.

THE INSPIRATION

Ben says they were inspired by the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden model, but wanted to take it one giant step further.

'This could be a national health initiative,' he enthuses. 'We thought if we could get one school to do it, it'd be an amazing achievement. But we always had it in mind that other schools would potentially come on board.'

Ben and James, who both run businesses in the permaculture space, have plenty of firsthand experience of the wellbeing that can come from growing your own vegetables, tending to a few chooks and making some conscious decisions to live more sustainably.

'The mental wellbeing of doing these simple activities – of growing food, preserving and harvesting – we wanted to share that,' Ben says. 'But I think to do that on a larger scale it needed to be tangible, so we did dream a bit bigger.'

UTILISING SCHOOL GROUNDS

FMS is a not-for-profit organisation, established by Ben and James, who are both equally passionate about transforming unused land within schools into regenerative market gardens.

'Schools are mostly underutilised outside of school hours. We want to activate these spaces and transform the school into a vibrant community hub all-year round,' says Ben. 'We believe schools can help realise the vision for better food security and accessibility for families while also mitigating the impacts of climate change by localising food production and reducing the carbon footprint of the food we eat.'

The FMS model enables partnerships to be forged between schools and regenerative farmers, creating access to land and a gateway to careers in regenerative agriculture.

'By connecting farmers with schools, the program brings local food production back into the heart of our communities.'

FEEDING THE COMMUNITY

Fiona Cadorel, a member of Bellarine Community Health's Healthy and Connected Communities team, says one in four families in the region struggle to put food on the table and the garden would go some way in helping to alleviate the problem.

'Families should be able to access healthy food that is also affordable, but we know that this is not always easy for the families in our community,' she says. 'This project will strengthen the local food system and increase access to locally grown, healthy and affordable food.'

Once up and running, it's hoped that the garden will produce enough to create affordable weekly organic vegie boxes for school families, free boxes for needy >



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families and fresh food for the school canteen.

Seed funding to the tune of \$123,000 came from the Victorian government’s Engage program which supports youth-led community engagement.

‘We want to empower local young people to be ecological stewards and change agents in their community,’ says Fiona.

A spokesperson from the student community sees the project as the perfect combination of community, creativity and education, saying, ‘Good food, good people: to me, this is what change looks like.’

A FARM IN A DAY

The Build a Farm in a Day Festival invited school and broader community members to purchase a ‘pay what you feel’ ticket to participate. More than 600 volunteers attended over the weekend, joining in the back-breaking task of turning a sports field into a no-dig garden.

James, an environmental and sustainability education expert, says the initial grunt work meant no digging would be required down the track.

‘Although this event is groundbreaking, we didn’t actually break any ground,’ he laughs. ‘It involved layering organic material to build diversity and soil health. To build our farm, we used renewable resources which were generously donated from local businesses, such as newspapers, straw, manure, cardboard and coffee grounds. This delicious melting mix of goodness results in the perfect growing environment for vegies.’

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Local businesses got behind the project supplying vast quantities of gardening gloves, wheelbarrows, cardboard and compost. Local musicians played, hospitality trucks were on hand, the Good Food group fed hardcore overnights dinner and breakfast, a local yoga instructor held a sunrise class and a pair of good samaritans attended to any first aid.

‘It may have looked like chaos from afar, but once each group of new participants found their flow, it was extraordinary to see the mass of individual people working as one,’ Fiona says. ‘The energy was real and for the first time, I truly witnessed the power of community.’

Support for the project also came from further afield with backing from the Diggers Foundation and Costa Georgiadis from *Gardening Australia*, a popular speaker at the official launch.

In a rousing speech, Costa admitted to shedding a few tears over the enormity of what had been achieved in such a short time.

‘It’s not about me, it’s what you all represent,’ he said, before pointing out more funding for the project was critical to employ a regenerative farmer and guarantee the longevity of the farm.

‘We want health budget,’ Costa said. ‘This is a national health initiative that is built on the basis of intimate connection and understanding of environment and country and history of land and soil.’

ECO CURRICULUM

Costa also spoke about the value of the farm for the college’s students. Year 10 students will be able to take a Farm My School elective. Meanwhile, other teachers plan to use the space in maths, science, geography and horticultural studies.

‘It’s (already) in the curriculum, yes,’ Costa continued. ‘But it’s not actively in the curriculum. And this is a model that James and Ben and Fiona and (principal) Wayne can take and leverage to the national community.’

‘It’s not just about those rows of vegetables. Those rows of vegetables are the foundation within which you can now take this and show other principals and show other school communities and other teachers. But most of all, other health organisations.’

BSC principal Wayne Johannsen says he was thrilled when Ben, James and Fiona presented to staff at the school. Not only could they see the curriculum benefits, but those responsible for wellbeing were excited about the opportunity the garden would provide to emotionally support students.

‘Farm My School will add significantly to the diversity of learning at the college, enhancing student engagement and wellbeing while strengthening the college’s connection with its community,’ Wayne says. ‘It will offer a hands-on learning experience to actively engage students in a >



Opening page Costa Georgiadis threw his support behind the initiative. This page, clockwise from top In just 24 hours, more than 600 volunteers turned a 1.5-acre soccer field into a vegie garden; (Clockwise from top) Fiona Cadorel, Kerri McCluskey (BSC manager), Wayne Johannesen, Ben, Costa and James; Progress at dawn; Straw, smiles and sunshine; Compost is a key ingredient in no-dig gardens.



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practical way, deepening their awareness of how they can make a very real difference to how we live.'

James says the facilities at the school, in addition to the fact that it abuts the local LandCare nursery, made it an ideal choice for the pilot program.

'We're excited about the commercial kitchen adjoining the future farm as well as an established VET Horticulture and Agriculture curriculum, giving students the opportunity to engage with the farm in all areas of their learning,' he says. 'Students will learn to grow, harvest, prepare and cook fresh produce from the farm that is right there on school grounds.'

THE FUTURE

Ben says a medium-term goal is for kids to discover vegies growing at their school at the start of term one next year.

'We wanted the kids to come back next year in February and see the food coming out of the ground,' he says. 'That was always our goal and I think we're going to do it.'

While Ben, James and Fiona will endeavour to find further funding for the project, there's plenty of jobs on their short-term agenda. The immediate to-do list includes rabbit-proof fencing, irrigation, planting and employing a regenerative farmer. Meanwhile, the organisation is open to approaches from other schools with the space to consider their own farm.

'We can grow it in our region and who knows where it can go from there,' Ben says. 'It's about doing what we can in our backyard. We've all seen the benefits of doing things in your own home.'

'This is just our backyard – our school.' ■



This article represents the permaculture principle OBSERVE AND INTERACT. For more info go to page 99.

Building a no-dig garden

WHETHER IT'S A SQUARE METRE IN YOUR BACKYARD OR AN ENTIRE SOCCER FIELD, THE PROCESS IS EXACTLY THE SAME

No-dig gardens are created using layers of nitrogen and carbon. Nitrogen is made up of all mostly green things like grass clippings, seaweed, manure, food scraps and fresh leaves – but compost, too – while carbon is generally brown; mulch, shredded cardboard, newspaper, dry leaves, twigs, straw or dry grass.

If you're building your garden on a grassed or weedy area, start by mowing the patch as close to the ground as you can before sprinkling a handful of pelatized chook manure or blood and bone over the area and water well. Use sheet mulch to completely cover the area with a layer of carbon (cardboard or thick newspaper), ensuring there are no gaps for weeds to escape, add 10 cm of mulch on top and wet thoroughly. Add a layer of nitrogen: manure or compost, followed by another layer of carbon and wet it down.

Alternate the carbon and nitrogen layers and remember to wet each layer of carbon you lay down. Create as many layers as you like – the more the better – but for the final layer, use a thick layer of mulch interspersed with pockets of organic compost to plant your seedlings directly into. Over time, the layers will decompose, build the soil and feed the plants. Most importantly, the structure of the soil remains undisturbed, as do any weed seeds.

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