



## Green fingers get to grips with a community plot

Cultivating a community garden has helped students at Stansted's Forest Hall School develop their horticultural skills while enjoying the outdoor space.

Children had designed the area as part of the Royal Horticultural Society's Campaign for School Gardening project The Green Plan It Challenge and back in March families gave up their time to bring the design to

life. Work then continued during lockdown.

The community garden benefitted from a £500 grant from the Ernest Cook Trust to buy welly boots and waterproof clothing for outdoor work, £500 from Stansted Parish Council to buy materials for the garden and £200 from Forest Hall School PTA. The Royal Horticultural Society also contributed up to £1,500.

# Birchwood pupils branching out as school's gardening club begins to bed in

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**S**tudents at Birchwood High School have been honing their horticultural skills during lockdown.

With the help of Well Bean Gardening's Wendy Gordon, children at the Parsonage Lane secondary have cultivated fruit and veg during weekly sessions.

Kate Byers, the school's community manager, said that the project has its roots in two programmes started before the coronavirus crisis, when Birchwood's Parents, Staff and Friends Association (PSFA) funded a six-week lunchtime course for pupils who are young carers, showing them in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere how to sow and grow plants.

Karen Homer, a higher level teaching assistant, had worked with students on an initial garden design as part of the Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) Green Plan It scheme to aid their science studies.

But to continue to bear fruit, further funding was required, so the Stort Valley and Villages Primary Care Network stepped in to back the healthy living initiative.

The original plan was for Wendy to run an after-school gardening club once a week for youngsters. When Covid-19 closed schools to all except vulnerable students and children of key workers, the new classes began.

For the past 12 weeks, the socially-distanced youngsters and staff have turned an unloved corner of the school grounds into a flourishing garden, helped with the donation of pepper plants from Homebase in Stansted Road before it shut at the start of the pandemic.

The green-fingered team have grown beans, courgettes, cucumbers, peppers, potatoes, pumpkin, sweetcorn, tomatoes, strawberries, herbs, sunflowers and other flowers, and have learned how to prepare – and enjoy eating – their organic crops, including beetroot and potatoes, within an hour of being dug out of the ground.

Assistant head Jolene Jacobson said: "The gardening club has been brilliant for our students during lockdown – they've especially enjoyed sampling the fruits of their labours."



Cerys waters one of the newly dug and planted beds

The school is determined that the gardening project will continue to grow and is appealing for sponsorship from businesses to fund further work, including raised beds, a pond and seating area.

Kate said that the benefits were clear: students were learning about science, nutrition and healthy living, and reaping mental health as well as educational benefits.

Wendy said: "Their genuine enthusiasm has been overwhelming. In between my visits they've been visiting the garden at lunchtimes to water and watch the plants. They've been waiting at the greenhouse for me every Tuesday, desperate to

show me what's flowering or producing fruit. It's been a very positive project in very uncertain times but certainly demonstrates the power of plants."

An RHS-qualified ex-teacher, before the pandemic Wendy also ran gardening sessions at Thorn Grove, Spellbrook and Birchanger primary schools, as well as weekly classes at Angels at Play Day Nurseries in Ware and Hoddesdon. She is on a mission to introduce all ages to the benefits.

She said: "You don't need a massive space or lots of fancy equipment. You just need some knowledge and lots of enthusiasm.

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