



Indie Paku digging potatoes.



Zucchini fritters are a hit.



Izzie Martin and Naomi Mellor-Wilson planting carrot seeds.

LIFE LESSONS

Meet the schoolchildren growing their own school lunches.



Charlotte Bird with silverbeet seedlings.

A small rural school in the Wairarapa is punching above its weight when it comes to teaching children about growing food, the environment and sustainability.

Whareama School, between Masterton and Riversdale, is one of more than 330 New Zealand schools that participate in Garden to Table, the charitable scheme that teaches tamariki to grow, harvest, prepare and share their own fresh food. More than 32,000 kids took part in Garden to Table last year, but Whareama School's 54 kids (ranging from Year 0 to 8) are taking things several steps further.

Not only do the schoolchildren grow their own food, but they also keep bees, preserve fruit, run seedling sales and make fruit leather to sell.

The school has run the programme for three and a half years. Although it started small, it's gone from strength to strength as new teachers have brought new ideas.

Senior teacher Dianne Christenson says it is a popular component of the school curriculum. "The kids love it and they learn a lot of practical skills that tie in with their classroom learning," she explains. "It teaches them maths skills when they are adjusting quantities, literacy skills when they are writing menus, and planning skills for deciding where to put things in the garden."

With about half of the student population coming from the farming families in the area, growing your own crops is nothing new to them – not the way it would be to children in more urban or suburban schools. Even so, Dianne says, the children have still been surprised to learn the many creative ways they can coax flavour out of the edibles they have grown. "They've learned you can make chips out of kale leaves, muffins from feijoa skins, and burger patties from veges.

"Garden to Table has also normalised the idea of trying something new at mealtimes. Kids will often say, 'That was actually very nice' after trying something they weren't sure about."

At least four Garden to Table sessions are held during each school term, and all three classes at the school are involved. On any day, one class will be assigned to work in the garden while a second will be in the kitchen, deciding what to make from that day's harvest. And the third class will head for the school's two beehives.

"The kids do everything a normal beekeeper would do," says Dianne. "They also built the hives, made and

waxed the frames, and decorated the hive boxes. Last year, we had a massive honey harvest, and the kids also made candles and beeswax wraps for sale. The money went towards buying new seedlings and plants."

An impressively diverse range of crops is grown in the school's six raised vege beds and two Vegepods. They include salad greens, herbs, rhubarb, onions, leeks, garlic, strawberries, kale, spring onions, broccoli, cabbages, silverbeet, spinach and kohlrabi. The school had its first crop of taro this year, and grows cucumbers and tomatoes to sell at the annual Pet Day in October.

The fruit trees include apples, feijoas, pears and peaches. A fruit glut led to the idea of making fruit leather to sell. Fruit is chopped, pureed and dehydrated, before being carefully cut and rolled by the kids into fruit straps.

The money from their sale is put towards more seeds for the garden. "We are very close to being self-sufficient financially, although of course we are also grateful for the donations we have received of seed mix, compost and tools," says Dianne.

Like most things in life, Garden to Table doesn't just happen on its own. It relies on the support of teachers, parent helpers and a local beekeeper to keep things running smoothly. Teacher assistant, Rachel Eden, does much of the planning work for each session.

"I like the way Garden to Table gets kids outside and teaches them to cook with seasonal foods," she says. "There's also a real focus on coming together at the end of each session. The kids lay the table before we sit down and share the food they've made."

Students Isaac Phillips, 13, and Izzie Martin, 12, say they enjoy getting out in the garden, working in different groups, and sharing the food they have cooked with their friends. "I make quite a lot of the recipes at home," Izzie says.

At the time of writing they were also looking forward to an upcoming Root to Tip competition, to be held at a local marae. The competition promotes the use of all parts of fresh crops such as tops, skins and stems. Groups of three kids plan and prepare a two-course menu, either a starter and main or main and dessert, for their entry. "It's a lot of fun," Isaac says. ■



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.