

Sowing and GROWING

A school in Surrey for youngsters with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities makes the most of the social and therapeutic benefits of horticulture, and is proud to have achieved the highest status in the RHS Campaign for School Gardening

Author: **Annie Gatti**, freelance garden writer. Photography: **The Ridgeway Community School**

The Ridgeway Community School in Farnham, Surrey, is a state school for children and youngsters aged 4–19 with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, particularly those with severe learning disabilities and complex medical issues. There has long been a small garden here, but six years ago the school introduced social and therapeutic horticulture which means that now 99 percent of pupils have weekly sessions of gardening, all through the year.

Horticultural therapist Martin Billett leads these sessions in the small (roughly 110sq m / 1,180sq ft), L-shaped paved space that contains raised beds for salads, a traditional vegetable plot for crops such as runner beans and spinach, a large greenhouse, a log cabin, and trestle tables under which wheelchairs can fit. The children's activities vary depending on their ability and age, but the starting point is getting them used to spending time in this outdoor classroom.

For some, tasks might be just five minutes long, and the social interaction is just as important as the activities. For the youngest, the garden is an exploratory play space, where sand, soil and grit are handled and moved about, and where plants and gardening equipment can become the triggers for cross-curricular links such as English, food technology, art, music therapy and maths. Martin gives an example of a youngster who won't count beyond five in class, but in the relaxed atmosphere of the greenhouse, where trays of pots are lined up on a bench, he will count confidently to 30. 'Social and therapeutic horticulture,' says Martin, 'is brilliant for helping youngsters overcome their fear of

touching things – we use differently textured leaves for example – and for calming people down if they're particularly anxious.'

Growing with the plants

Seed sowing can start with the primary-age group, and as children come up through the secondary school, more work focuses on motor skills, self-esteem and teamwork. For the most able pupils, there's the opportunity to do a three-year City & Guilds course in practical horticulture, as the school is an accredited centre. 'Some of our more able and talented group show near-professional skills in pricking out seedlings,' says Martin proudly. This summer, for the first time, a school leaver has left with a diploma (the highest level) in the course.

Embracing horticulture as part of the curriculum means these sessions continue through the year. A log cabin, sponsored by a local garden centre, has provided a place for winter activities, and for those with complex needs Martin brings the garden indoors, in wheelbarrows. Every year, most of the school is involved in planting up hanging baskets. Plug plants arrive over several weeks in February and pupils grow them on, feed them and plant them up for sale to parents, friends and local pubs. The profits go straight back into the school garden, to buy equipment and plants.

It is not surprising this school has achieved a Level 5 (the highest) award in the RHS Campaign for School Gardening. It has succeeded in making horticulture a central part of the learning environment and is leading the way by training teachers of other Special Educational Needs and Disabilities schools in Surrey to do the same. ●



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Gardening journey

Martin Billett (left) has been involved with The Ridgeway Community School for 23 years; his 26-year-old autistic son was a pupil. When the school garden was established, Martin volunteered to help with lessons and then trained as a horticultural therapist with the charity Thrive. In 2010 he took charge of horticulture across the school, and in 2015 was an RHS School Gardening Champion of the Year finalist. 'I was delighted special-needs education got a chance to strut its stuff alongside mainstream education. It is thought provoking that a tomato seed will grow as well for me as for someone on the autistic spectrum.'

www.rhs.org.uk The Campaign for School Gardening helps teachers and youth leaders to develop a garden as a resource to benefit children's learning, health and well-being. For more, to register a school or group, or for stories from other schools, visit: schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk
❖ Search 'Ridgeway' at the page above for a school video.
❖ To support the RHS Campaign for School Gardening, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/schoolgardeningdonations

