

Inside the Schools with Edible Playgrounds

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Raised beds at Rockmount primary school. Photograph: Rockmount primary school

Schools are discovering that getting students to grow their own greens can make a big difference. This hands-on method is so powerful, in fact, that it can even detoxify the dinner table nemesis of generations: the brussel sprout.

“We had a group of children who were so excited about eating brussels sprouts last Christmas because they had harvested them,” says Helen Carvall, headteacher of [Rockmount primary school](#) in Croydon. “They harvested a load of chard too, and made posters saying ‘Glorious chard!’ which they put up in the dining room. They were encouraging the other children, saying: ‘Eat this! We grew it!’”

The school had already launched a popular gardening club and been designated as a “[food flagship school](#)” (committing to lower levels of sugar, salt and fat in its meals) when Carvall decided to create an [edible playground](#). Working with the charity [Trees for Cities](#), they transformed a little-used sensory garden into an allotment growing rhubarb, berries, beans, onions, chard, potatoes and apples. The first planting finished in January and Trees for Cities will now work with the school for the rest of the academic year to support growing and teaching.

Edible playgrounds are springing up across the country and address several key areas of concern around children’s health. They teach pupils about nutrition, encourage physical activity, and can help with food poverty. They are also a much-needed source of fresh produce in “[food deserts](#)” – areas where it is a struggle to find healthy, affordable produce. It’s an issue that Stephen Ritz, the

US-based advocate for the movement, knows only too well. In his area of the Bronx, New York, he says, “it’s easier to get liquor than a lettuce”.

Ritz’s in-school agriculture began by accident with a [pack of seeds behind a heater in 2009](#). It has since expanded into [Green Bronx Machine](#), a nationwide project helping other schools to start their own green programmes, and a [TED talk](#) that has been viewed almost a million times. At this point, Ritz’s students have grown 35,000lbs of vegetables. But the trick, he says, is to get the basics right first.

“You’ve got to start small,” he advises. “Start small, celebrate often. Let the kids run the ship, or at least let them think that they do. Be a benevolent dictator. Grow the things that they like, or the things that are important to their parents and grandparents. Ask questions. Start discussions.”
