

SCHOOL AMBASSADORS 2023

We have decided to appoint two School Ambassadors this year and we will look forward to reading their news and advice in future editions of the e-newsletter. Very many congratulations go to Ruth Steele who we have appointed as our new School ambassador in Central Dorset. Here she is:

My name is **Ruth Steele** and I have the great fortune to be a TA at the Abbey Primary School in Shaftesbury. Fortunate, not just because of the amazing people I work alongside, adults and children, but also because of our wonderful outside space. I am an enthusiastic amateur gardener with a basic understanding of the practicalities of gardening around an academic year, with limited finances and lots of children!!!!

My main piece of advice is to start small. We all have grand ideas of feeding the whole school but where this is nearly achieved e.g. Hanford School near Child Okeford, they have 2 acres of walled garden!! I offer each class the chance to grow and care for an edible crop and an ornamental. For example, one class grew peas, most children having insisted they hated them. After nurturing them from seed to picking, all had a taste when we harvested them and we even had some converts. If things fail to grow or die from neglect e.g. Year 3's runner beans that they forgot to bring in and got hit by a frost resulting in a blackened mushy yuk; I don't see this as a failure. The children learn from these misadventures and seem all the more committed to being successful with the next crop.

Be careful what you grow. Every year our children ask if they can grow pumpkins at school. My reply "Who is going to water them through the summer holidays? And no, you can't take them home and then bring them back in the Autumn Term because have you seen the size of a pumpkin plant!!!" Holiday watering is a pain. Children are usually very enthusiastic to volunteer BUT make sure their parents are on board • • with this commitment. I actually speak to the parents myself and never grow through the summer holidays.

The RHS Gardening for Schools produces a brilliant calendar of edible plants to grow termly. Recycle, reuse and repurpose. Holey old wellies make novel plant pots and have a long root run. Compost from pots can be reused in beds. Beg, Borrow, and I'm not advocating stealing, but ask for surplus plants, seeds and supplies from carers, grandparent and other family members. There is often a wide range of skills available from this pool of people who are only too willing to help if they are asked.

Look out for free seeds and plants from organisations like Woodland Trust, RSPB, National Trust and Dorset Wildlife Trust. The Royal Horticultural Society is a source of valuable information as is Garden Organic.

The Dorset Garden Trust has been a huge source of information and advice for our school. Grants are available from them to fund new projects. As their School Ambassador I am always willing to help out with ideas and projects and can be contacted via them. I know how much the children love to plant and grow, how good it is for their physical and mental wellbeing and it's such a cross-curricular activity (I can always squeeze in a bit of counting and weighing: spelling and legible writing - otherwise people can't read the labels.)

It's so rewarding to work alongside the children and to see their delight and pride at what they can grow.

And many congratulations to our second School Ambassador, **Dr. Vicky Myers** has been appointed the Schools' Ambassador for the schools in the east of the county. Vicky is a parent of children who attend the Mudeford Infants and Junior schools in Christchurch. She has a background of working for the Woodland Trust and was sad to see the neglected garden at Mudeford Infants school about five years ago. Since then, she has worked

tirelessly to build a team of parents who have all contributed to the maintenance and development of the garden. The garden is used for teaching purposes across the curriculum and has become a valuable asset to the school. As her eldest child has now moved to Mudeford Junior school, she is now working hard to re-establish a gardening club at Mudeford Junior school and is happy to offer advice to other schools via her school's visitor Mary Reader who looks after Christchurch and schools in the east of Bournemouth.

Reports

- We are delighted to publish the first report from our second Schools Ambassador, **Vicky Myers** who works alongside pupils at Mudeford Infants School and supports schools in the east of the county.

It's a privilege to be asked to be a School Gardening Ambassador for Dorset Gardens Trust and I am delighted to have the role. Over the past few months, I have already visited Avonwood Primary School and Pokesdown Community Primary School and I'm starting to believe that I might have some useful knowledge to share.

I fell into school gardening when my son started Mudeford Infants School four years ago. I have a background in conservation and community engagement and, most importantly, at this time, I had a little spare time on my hands. So when in 2019, I was standing next to the school's derelict vegetable garden, I wanted to see if we could restore it as a learning resource. The Head agreed that I could take it on, so with the help of volunteers and funding from sources like Dorset Gardens Trust we bought it back to life. More recently the garden has achieved RHS Level 5 school garden status which recognises that our garden is now an established educational and learning resource. The reason we restored the garden is for the benefit of the children, so at the school we (some of our volunteers) take groups of children out to the garden every Thursday afternoon to teach them about growing fruit and vegetables, as well as nature and the environment. Mudeford Infant School continues to develop their outside space and have recently had an advisory visit by Learning through Landscapes who are a charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. With funding from the Friends of the school we are currently developing play opportunities in the outdoor space, creating outdoor classrooms and communication spaces and enabling more adventurous play including loose parts play (guided by the children's imaginations) and den making.

With all things horticultural, I am always acutely aware of how limited my knowledge is, however I continue learning every day. I can now fairly confidently identify plants that thrive in dry sandy soils, how to recruit volunteers, how to create wildlife-friendly gardens and I'm getting better at growing vegetables. What motivates me is providing children with the opportunity to be inspired by the outdoors through growing, touching and learning about plants. Working with Dorset Gardens Trust and Mary Reader, I can advise on the practicalities of school gardening and help schools in applying for grants.