

# Fresh harvest

With rising obesity levels across Australia, renowned chef Stephanie Alexander is pioneering a fresh approach to educating children about food.

STORY: CLARE CREEGAN  
PHOTOS: ANDREW DAWSON

Stephanie Alexander smiles as she remembers a school child's shock and delight when first tasting fresh, stir-fried broccoli.

"This young girl just couldn't believe it was the same as the slimy, grey, tasteless stuff that she was served at home; that this was the same product that had always been offered to her in a way she found very unpalatable," Ms Alexander says.

Children across Australia may soon experience the same thrill, when they learn about growing and preparing healthy, fresh food as part of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program.

Stephanie Alexander—renowned chef, restaurateur and writer—founded the Kitchen Garden program to teach children about the pleasures of good food.

"The underlying belief is that by introducing this holistic approach we have a chance to positively influence children's food choices in ways that have not been tried before," Ms Alexander says.

She has made a submission to the House of Representatives Health Committee inquiry into obesity in Australia, calling for the program to be expanded to change the way children learn about food.

**TAKING THE INITIATIVE:**  
*Stephanie Alexander has introduced a successful food education program.*

"It seems to me that if children aren't given an education and the opportunity to develop a broad and active interest in food, we really have no one but ourselves to blame for children turning to the advertisers and the manufacturers of convenience foods."

"I think unless we take initiative and introduce some sort of educational intervention in children's lives, for a great number of children who have a lack of modelling at home, they have no understanding and no broad interest in fresh food—they don't know how to grow it, they haven't tasted a great number of things, they are not encouraged to sit around the table and discuss things and their lives, I believe, are diminished by all of that."





The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program currently operates in 27 pilot schools in Victoria. In August this year the program received \$12.8 million from the federal government to expand into a further 190 schools across Australia.

As part of the program, schools design, plant and tend a vegetable patch. Children learn to prepare healthy food using these freshly grown ingredients.

With almost 25 per cent of Australian children (aged between 2-16 years) classified as overweight or obese, Stephanie Alexander hopes the program will address this problem by encouraging better food choices.



**GROWING AND HARVESTING:** *Westgarth Primary School in Victoria has been part of the pilot program.*



“It seems to me that if children aren’t given an education and the opportunity to develop a broad and active interest in food, we really have no one but ourselves to blame for children turning to the advertisers and the manufacturers of convenience foods. They simply will not have the skills to know how to take a tomato, take an eggplant, take a potato, take a lettuce and turn it into a lovely meal.”

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program covers four key elements: growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing.

Ms Alexander says the growing and harvesting parts of the program are vital in teaching children about food.

“We have found that children really respond to the hands on, experiential thing of actually growing their own food—they feel very proud and very responsible.”

Helping children to understand the seasonality of food—what grows in what time of the year—is an essential part of the program.

“For children to understand that things grow at different times, that not everything is available all the time, is a very important lesson.”

Many children are unaware of where food comes from and how things grow. Stephanie Alexander says it’s important for children to see the cycle of planting, growing and eating.

“We do find children who have never ever understood where a potato comes from, so when they pull up the first of their potato crop and find these little dangling potato things it is truly magical for them.



“We have found that children really respond to the hands on, experiential thing of actually growing their own food—they feel very proud and very responsible.”

“I think being able to see the whole ‘round’ if you like—seeing things grow, understanding what freshness and seasonality means, then understanding how to handle it—is a very, very wonderful thing and it is a very powerful bit of information for children; it gives them independence for the rest of their lives. They know they can always produce a simple, delicious meal with freshly available ingredients.”

Ms Alexander says the contact she has had with people in her restaurants and through her writing has highlighted a broad lack of understanding about food.

“Whenever we talk about food-interested public I always feel I need to qualify it immediately by saying there is a small percentage of the population who really care about what they eat. They are the people who go to farmers markets and watch food shows on television, who grow their own food.

“But there is a vast percentage of the population who, for lots of reasons, seem to be completely disinterested in what they put in their mouths. I think that large bulk of the population, because they don’t know of the joys of food, just opt for convenience.

“I realised fully, from my contact with a range of individuals, just how many people are paralysed by anxiety about food preparation. They think it has to be complicated, they think it is something they can’t possibly do. So I guess my brief has always been to help people get through the anxiety and realise that it is absolutely simple, it’s inexpensive, it’s delicious.

“And of course now that goes on to the children, because when the parents don’t know, the children don’t know.”

Ms Alexander says the Kitchen Garden program was inspired by her own love of fresh food, developed at an early age.

“My own childhood was a very rich one from a culinary point of view. There was certainly not much money, but we ate well, we talked a lot, we all sat around the table. As children we helped my parents and grandfather to grow things, to look after the chooks and the ducks, to make things, it was just a great pleasure.

“The highlight of the day was always eating together, that was how I grew up and I wanted all children to have that same level of understanding.”

She hopes children involved in the program will develop a lasting awareness of nutrition and food preparation.

“I think it is quite likely, unless it is being reinforced at home, that it might take a while to come out into children’s life behaviour. My feeling is that when they are moving into an independent living situation they will probably really understand how they can make pasta, how they can make a simple tomato sauce and a quick salad, and they will be richer for it for the rest of their lives.”

Ms Alexander also highlights the broader benefits of the program, which enables other aspects of the school curriculum, like science and maths, to be demonstrated.

“In the Kitchen Garden schools the program tends to be a whole of school activity. The classroom teachers become very involved. There are concepts that are touched on in both the garden and the kitchen, such as environmental science, measurement, art and design—those things can be built on by the classroom teacher.

“The other big thing that happens, that perhaps we didn’t fully appreciate before we started, is how the community becomes engaged in the school, which is fantastic for the school. People who hadn’t been involved until then—tradies



and fathers—dedicate their time when they haven't had that sort of opportunity before.

"One of the things that I think is very important in this program is the insight into cultural diversity, and we do try to make that very practical. If we make a risotto one week, we might make a pilaf the next, and then something with sticky rice; and we will make the point that there are people all over the world eating rice in different ways."

Westgarth Primary School in Victoria has been involved in the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Pilot Program for almost two years.

School principal Grace Conway says the garden has been a tremendous success and provides a focal point for children at the school.

"We started with a flat piece of land and ended up with 11 garden beds and a crop that feeds 220 students every week," Ms Conway says.

"The children just love it. When they grow things from nothing, when they see the tomatoes ripen, they are excited and they have a sense of pride."

She says the program builds a sense of teamwork and cooperation among the students, parents and community helpers.

"There is a real excitement that comes from what they are doing. The students learn how to use the knives and cooking equipment properly. There is a sense of trust that they are going to behave properly.

"I think the program is creating a more positive attitude towards food. We are seeing that children have a different way of talking about food, which we haven't seen before. They understand that certain foods go well together. I can see this program having lifelong benefits in changing children's attitudes to food."

Ms Conway says the program, with appropriate planning and support, could provide ongoing benefits to all schools.

**TREMENDOUS SUCCESS:** *Westgarth Primary School Principal Grace Conway and a student in the garden established under the program by Stephanie Alexander (pictured in her own garden).*

"I would thoroughly recommend the Kitchen Garden program to any school. It is very flexible in the way you structure the program and which years you have participate in the program, depending on the size of the school.

"Despite the flexibility it is not just a 'flavour of the month'. Schools should undertake the project as a long term one.

"We need the education department and the politicians to learn more about this program. When they come out and see the program, they see that it is more than just English and maths, it is learning about the environment in a real way."

Stephanie Alexander's submission to the House of Representatives Health Committee's obesity inquiry highlighted the need for ongoing support for the program.

The Kitchen Garden program is one of many measures being examined by the inquiry to address the obesity problem in Australia. Ms Alexander says the inquiry is important in finding new ways to tackle obesity.

"I have been watching all the measures that have been introduced over the last 25 years in attempts to counteract the growing rates of overweight and obese children. And I have watched a lot of it with great dismay.

**"We started with a flat piece of land and ended up with 11 garden beds and a crop that feeds 220 students every week."**

"As far as I can see by showing children charts, pyramids, ticks, shaking your finger at them and saying don't eat this, do eat this, all the government has been doing is spending a relatively small amount of money producing pamphlets and brochures and pyramids, and the messages have been completely ignored. The rates of overweight and obesity just continue to rise.

"I have always believed that the answer and the missing piece of the jigsaw, which has never been tried, was educating children in the most pleasurable way, from a very early age.

"We have great anecdotal evidence from our 27 active projects that the children do have a much greater interest in what is going on in the kitchen. They deliver different messages to their parents, they like to help with the shopping, they want to start little gardens.

"We had a mother the other day saying her daughter had told her, 'Mum, you can't possibly chop parsley with a knife like that'. It changes the way they think about food and that must be positive." •

For more information on the obesity inquiry by the House of Representatives Health Committee, including access to the submission by Stephanie Alexander, visit [www.apf.gov.au/haa](http://www.apf.gov.au/haa) or email [haa.reps@apf.gov.au](mailto:haa.reps@apf.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4145. A video news item on the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program is at: [www.apf.gov.au/ath](http://www.apf.gov.au/ath) and for more information on the program visit: [www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au](http://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au)