

# Plant a garden for the future

There are many benefits to planting a food garden at your school, writes **Thabo Mohlala**

**F**ood gardens at schools can help alleviate poverty within a community, promote farming as a career and encourage a spirit of entrepreneurship as learners are taught to sell surplus vegetables to the public.

So said Ravi Pillay, spokesperson of Nestlé South Africa, the head office of which is in Switzerland.

Nestlé has expanded its Community Nutrition Programme to include schools, following a realisation that schools can play a critical role in feeding learners, particularly those who come from poor communities. The focus, said Pillay, is on food gardens that can enhance the National Schools' Nutrition Feeding Scheme by adding vegetables. After 16 years of running the programme and with buy-in from the department of basic education, the schools' category was launched in 2009 to help schools fight poverty and malnutrition.

According to Pillay, "many schools in the country already have their own food gardens. Some have leased them to community members to feed their families and donate a portion of their harvest to the schools".

Some teachers have integrated extracurricular projects such as food gardens as a best-practice teaching resource, he said. "Children learn well if they can relate what they are taught in class to what they do or see outside – practical application is crucial."

Pillay said learners go on to become catalysts and agents to promote and raise awareness about the importance of food gardens in the communities where they live.

"They learn how to set up their own food garden at home. It enhances their appreciation of nature and the environment, they know how to optimise the use of soil and water, learn about organic farming and its benefits and, more crucially, they learn how to take good care of the land as a key resource for future generations," he said.

Asked how one decides what and when to plant, Nestlé's Agricultural Services Unit said this depends on individual needs, but schools can plant any crop as long as they followed the instructions on the seed pack.

It is important to do some soil analysis before planting crops. Some crops grow well in certain types of soil. For example, cauliflower and carrots do not grow well in sandy soil, but if the soil is well prepared before planting, they might grow. Mixing the soil with compost helps such vegetables to grow.

Vegetables such as spinach, cabbage and beetroot are popular

because they grow throughout the year. If you plant with the intention of selling surplus produce, it is wise to conduct research to ensure that pricing is aligned with the market price.

Nestlé's Agricultural Services Unit provided the following guide for starting a vegetable garden:

- Identify a piece of land in your yard. Land size can vary from yard to yard.

- Demarcate the identified land, either by digging a furrow around it with a spade or by using a single wire or piece of string or rope fixed to steel rods or wooden sticks inserted into the ground at intervals around the area.

- Establish the depth of the soil (soil depth is important to allow roots to develop in such a way that the crop is fed sufficiently). Depth of the soil is determined by driving an ordinary garden spade (length of the blade may vary from 20cm to 30cm) into the soil as far as you can. Land with a soil depth of more than 25cm is best for growing leafy (cabbage), root (carrot) or "fruit" (egg plant) crops. When working on land with a soil depth of less than 20cm, you have to use the raised seed bed method (soil is raised above the land surface level in a heap). Or you can plant the crops in pots.

- Soil test. Initially, it is advisable to take a soil sample for analysis at a recognised laboratory as a once-off activity. (Soil analysis will provide a guide to the status of soil nutrients and soil structure.) Crops need nutrients to grow and soil structure gives an indication of when and how to irrigate. When gardening, it is highly recommended to use organic material to replace required nutrients and to improve soil structure (for example, compost and kraal manure). Chemical fertilisers may be used as a once-off during the initial phase while compost and other organic materials are being developed.

- Soil preparation (have all your gardening tools handy – spade, fork, wheelbarrow, hand hoe). First, clear the demarcated land of any rubbish, grass and weeds. Use a garden spade or fork to cultivate the soil and make sure you dig to a depth of not less than 30cm. Break the soil by redigging or with the use of a garden rake (if soil is hard, water the soil first). Next, apply kraal manure, compost or fertiliser to improve soil nutrients and structure. Work the material thoroughly into the soil. Allow the land to stay crop-free for the recommended waiting period before planting. If the waiting period is more than a week, dig your soil again before planting your seeds



Gontse Primary School, located in an informal settlement in Soshanguve, won the schools' category of Nestlé South Africa's Community Nutrition Awards



Learners who participate in food gardens go on to become catalysts who raise awareness about the importance of caring for the land in the communities where they live. Photos: Oupa Nkosi

or seedlings.

- Try to plant your crops in rows. Do not mix different crops in a row.

- Planting the crop. Most vegetables have fine seeds, so it is important to prepare a very fine seedbed and to know the planting depth. Planted seeds can be protected from strong sun radiation by using grass clippings as mulch. This also reduces evaporation while seedlings are germinating. Seedlings are easy to plant, but you have to be gentle when putting the roots into the soil.

- Irrigation. Water plays a vital role in helping your crops to germinate and grow well. Water is a scarce resource; therefore, gardens may be irrigated with waste water from the house (kitchen or laundry

water, even if mixed with common washing powders or soaps), but avoid using water with heavy soap content, especially while the plants are still small. This water can be collected into one big container from which you can use a coffee mug-size container to water seedlings or seeds two or three times a day. Bulk water-holding containers should be kept in a safe place and closed with a lid that has a small opening. This will allow free air circulation while preventing insects from breeding in the water and preventing children from drinking it by mistake. Rain water can be collected from the roof of the house and used in the garden.

- Weeding. Chemical weed control is not recommended for gardens. Weed by hand.

## WIN WIN WIN

Enter the schools' category of Nestlé South Africa's Community Nutrition Awards.

The schools' category is open to all schools and is divided into three categories: overall winner (prize money R50 000) and two runners-up (prize money R20 000), and the most promising school pockets R10 000.

Interested schools should fill in a form off the Nestlé website, [www.nestle.co.za](http://www.nestle.co.za), and send it – with photos of their gardens – to Nestlé to be assessed by a team of adjudicators. Deserving entries will be short-listed and site inspectors will be dispatched to look at the gardens.

Prize money may be spent on the schools' basic needs and upkeep.

Gontse Primary School, in an informal settlement in Soshanguve, 35km north of Tshwane, was the first winner of the schools category.

For more information, call Nestlé South Africa on 011 514 6638.

The closing date is April 30.

As a special gesture to schools that receive *the Teacher*, Nestlé would like to offer 10 vouchers to the value of R1 000 each for garden implements, seeds and seedlings.

Schools may ask learners to submit a colourful drawing or painting of their gardening projects on either A3 or A4 paper. The closing date for submission of entries is June 30.

Send entries to:  
Schools Garden Competition  
Nestlé South Africa  
8 Anslow Crescent  
Anslow Office Park  
Bryanston, 2021

- Disease control. Mechanical and biological methods are highly recommended although there are some chemicals that can be used in the garden that are less harmful.

- Crop rotation. Try to rotate (plant different crops) by not planting the same crop on the same spot every season.