

# Growing farming skills

## Thabo Mohlala

When the bell rings for lunch at the Zuurbekom Intermediate School, the pupils can expect hot meals prepared from the fresh produce picked in the school garden.

It is the same garden that helped the school to win the Community Nutrition Award, sponsored by Nestlé South Africa, last year, which earned the school R60 000 in prize money.

Benjamin Vinger, principal at Zuurbekom Intermediate in western Gauteng, expressed his excitement.

"This is very encouraging to us. It shows that the hard work that we put in was worth our efforts. Our aim now is to grow the project."

Vinger said that, when they started the garden two years ago, it was just a dry patch of land. "With dedication we tilled it and, with the help of the provincial departments of health, education and agriculture, it was transformed into a fertile and productive piece of ground," he said.

"The Japanese International Co-operation Agency and South Africa's Joint Aid Management also came to the party and provided technical support in the form of a tractor, seeds and shading."

Vinger also highlighted the role played by the local elderly people, mostly women, who are part of a government initiative known as the Community Work Project.

He said they were a critical component of the project and that they even looked after the garden during the school holidays.

The vegetables are sold to the public and the surplus augments the food supplied by the national school nutrition programme.

Vinger said: "We have adopted a

local orphanage called the Philani Community Development Centre. They also benefit from our surpluses. We regularly donate food parcels and sometimes we even cook them fresh meals."

The school has developed learning materials to teach children about the importance of food gardens, how to start one, and what and how to plant, Vinger said.

Kgothala Chisale, a grade six pupil at the school, wants to pursue farming as a career. She said she would like to follow in her grandmother's footsteps. She is a farmer.

"What I enjoy most is getting involved in all the stages, from planting seedlings to hoeing, watering and harvesting," said Chisale.

Nestlé has been running the community awards for the past 17 years. Company spokesperson Ravi Pillay said food gardens not only helped to alleviate poverty but also promoted farming as a career and entrepreneurship among pupils as they were taught how to market surplus vegetable to the public.

For more information on the competition, schools can contact Nestlé South African directly at *corporate.affairs@za.nestle.com* or call the company on 011 514 6638.

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