



Engagement, communication, inspiration and ownership

Advice for working with young people at a school allotment

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RHS School Gardening Champion of the Year (2018)



Credit: Jason Bye



The most important things...

1. **RAPPORT:** The **most important** thing to get right is rapport and building strong and sound relations with young people. This also goes for having a very positive and trusting relationship with the Senior Leadership Team, and *especially* the headteacher.
2. **SPEAKING:** As a principle, there is a very correct way to speak to children/young people that shows them the greatest respect and, at the same time, brings a high degree of worth and value.
3. **LOTS OF POSITIVITY:** Always be extremely positive and celebrate *anything* that a young person does at an allotment, no matter how small or insignificant. This is how to help young people feel valued and it helps to create a degree of ownership. Young people may wish to come back to help if an adult has recognised something that they have achieved.
4. **CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS:** When giving new tasks to young people it is always best to give a visual demonstration first, so they get the idea, or leave something half attempted that they can finish.
5. **ULTIMATE AIM: A good experience and the bigger picture!**
It's crucial to think way ahead with what you are ultimately trying to achieve for young people. From our understanding, young people should have a fantastic experience whilst working on *their* school allotment. A school allotment is a practice garden, which means it's totally okay for things to go imperfectly; it's a place of learning after all! It's also important not to over-complicate things. However, it is **absolutely paramount** to make sure that young people are enjoying themselves. It's great if they learn something new about growing food, but even better if they remember having a lovely time. This *could* mean that when they become young adults they will be inspired to grow their own food because of the good experience that you provided for them at secondary school. We all choose subjects/interests based on whether we had a good teacher at school, don't we?!



PART 1:

The stages of making a school allotment sustainable



From experience, I would highly recommend a school aims for the following when starting an allotment for the first time. If you have already begun, it might be worth considering, following our model, the location of your school allotment.

Observe first: It is extremely important to: (1) Make an ecological observation of the proposed site of a school allotment. Where does the sun rise and set? What types of wildlife and plants are already present? What resources already exist? (2) Make a geographical observation of the proposed site: is it too far or too close to the school? (3) Make a human observation: what is the ethos of the school? Are there any parents or members of the local community who may help the school allotment? More observations can always follow!

Create: Follow a rough design plan and start to physically build the school allotment, using as many free, reclaimed, recycled and upcycled materials that are as close to the

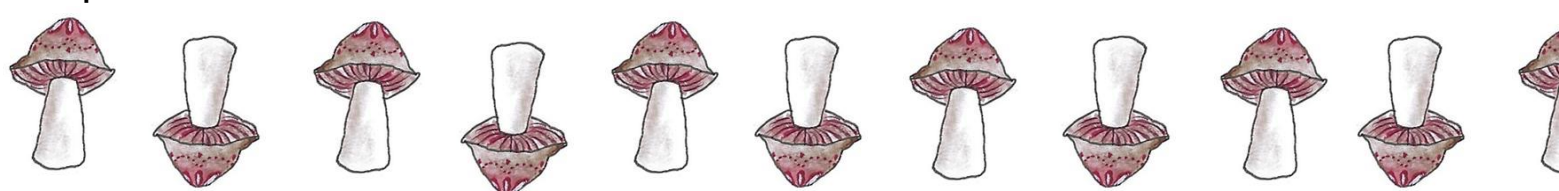


school as possible. There may be only a few volunteers to begin with, but more will come to help once they (the young people) see things taking shape. It's very important to make the idea a reality and *never* give up with the vision.

Inspire! This will naturally happen when the numbers grow and young people really start to enjoy themselves. Young people should really start to understand, at this point, that growing your own food and leading more sustainable lives is crucial to the planet's future. If efforts have been made to value the contributions of young people at this stage, young people will want to return to help because they have been made to feel valued. Expect young people to start volunteering their own parents at this stage too! The selling of produce should certainly take place at this point.



Engage: Start talking about helping out at the up and coming (or current) school allotment in the classroom, or hold an inspirational assembly. Encourage students to take part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award at the school allotment. Once a few young people turn up, and have a good experience, more will certainly follow. Seeing is believing! At all times, it is paramount that young people are made to feel highly valued at the school allotment; making young people feel that they are important and play a role will empower them to come again. Parents, staff and members of the school's local community might start to volunteer at this point.



Develop: With a sound team of young people to help you, along with additional staff, parents and even members of the local community (some may have certain expertise that a school allotment needs, e.g. woodwork or experienced grower), the school allotment has organically 'grown its own help' and has started to forge a 'shared responsibility'. This is the moment a school allotment will really take off and develop into something far more impressive and inspiring!



The school allotment is now fully sustainable!

This is the ultimate goal for a school allotment. It must never be a 'one year, one hit wonder'. A school allotment must be a permanent place for learning to take place. It must never be forgotten about nor should it ever cease to become operational. At this final stage, the school allotment has inspired all in the school, students and teachers alike,



as it has now become part of the ethos of the school itself; there is a clear understanding that the school allotment is a very important place for alternative learning to take place. It is also very well known in the local community. The school allotment now has all the necessary resources (natural, human volunteers and finances) to keep going for many, many years to come.





PART 2:



Growing your own help


How to grow a group of volunteers for a school allotment and create a community that forges a shared responsibility

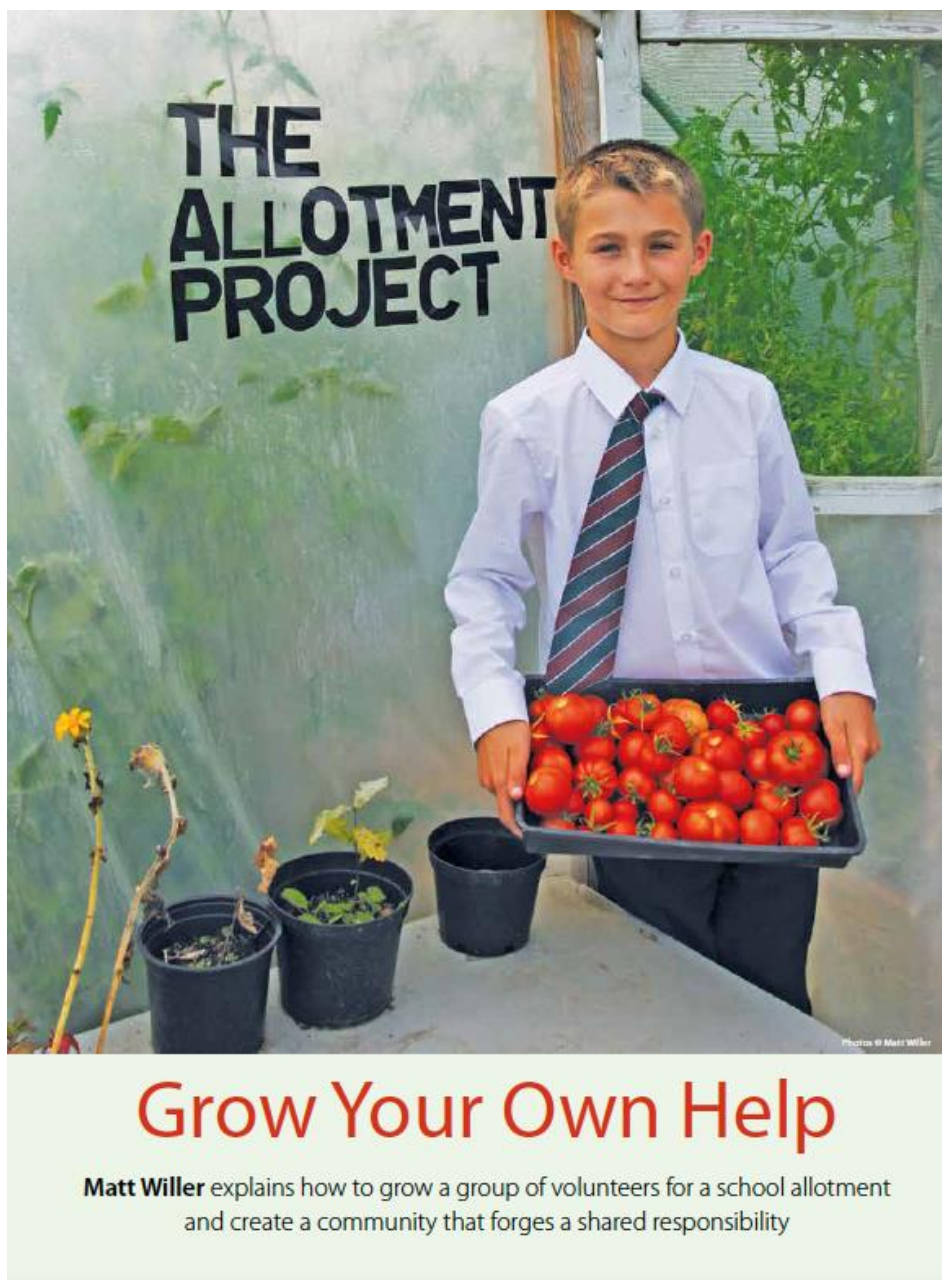


The key people that any school allotment should have:

- **The Leaders:** This could be a teacher, a student, a group of students or all of these.
- **The Loyals:** These are your keen beans who show up all the time. There is a high degree of ownership with these young people.
- **The Boosters:** Sometimes all allotments need a big tidy up or sort out or even a launch if you are starting a new project. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award or National Citizen Service are great examples of 'boosters'; reliable workforces throughout the year.



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- **The Enrichers:** These people are paramount to any school allotment. An ‘enricher’ could be a parent or a member of the local community who comes with a skill set or knowledge/experience that can literally enrich a school allotment.
 - **The Stewards:** These people are the ‘wise overseers’ of a school allotment after it has been created and trialed for at least a year. Any person from the above categories could be a ‘steward’ as a member of a school’s allotment committee. The body of people should be diverse and exist to safeguard a school project and to overlook the ‘big picture’ each academic year and beyond.



Please [click here](#) to download a PDF of Matt’s article *Growing Your Own Help* which appeared in the Permaculture Magazine.

