

# Grow, learn, sustain

History teacher Matt Willer is not just a skilled gardener; he is an innovative educator and passionate environmentalist

WORDS: Rachel Buller ♦ PHOTOS: Jason Bye



Matt Willer's ambitious 'Allotment Project' has transformed an unused corner of a school playing field into an extraordinary vegetable garden, involving more than 100 pupils and providing organic produce for the school kitchen and local community.

Last year, he won the prestigious Royal Horticultural Society's School Garden Champion of the Year award, nominated by staff, parents and students and his project at Reepham High School goes from strength to strength.

From attending a secondary school with a working farm attached and working and travelling in rural Uganda and Cuba, where it is essential for communities to grow their own produce, to having his own allotment in Norwich, it is a long held passion for history teacher Matt.

"As a teacher, I refuse to accept that I am just employed to help young people pass their exams. Of course grades are important, but going to school should also be about teaching children and young people about life and understanding where food comes from and creating a more sustainable world. It should absolutely be part of every child's educational experience," he says.

"It's really simple; there is no ambiguity; it is absolutely about helping to create a better, more sustainable environmentally friendly world. We live in a world that is grossly and embarrassingly unsustainable. Growing food local to where we live and work is far better for the environment as there is virtually no carbon footprint. When I started to build The Allotment Project I knew ▶



that what the children would grow would be organic and take only five minutes to deliver to the school canteen for cooking.”

But he says the project’s benefits extend far beyond learning about gardening and the environment.

“Problem-solving and working as a team are all part of The Allotment Project. The students are always made to feel genuinely valued and that it is their project along with everybody else’s. Students learn social skills and hopefully become enriched by spending time with other human beings from our parent and community volunteers to their own peers.”

He began The Allotment Project in 2015 and in four years there have been hundreds of students involved in its development. They give up their lunch hour to help and it gives them a great opportunity to let off steam away from the indoor classroom environment.

Everything grown is organic. There is a new polytunnel to grow salad crops for the school canteen, a new ‘rope pump’ made entirely from up-cycled materials will harvest 4,000 litres of rainwater collected in underwater tanks, they make their own compost and no fossil fuels are used in the site’s maintenance. There is even a chicken coop housing a colony of rescued and donated birds.

Matt also adopts a back-to-basics approach, with grass cutting done by sickle and scythe and containers and building materials made from all sorts of



**ABOVE:**  
RHS School Gardening Champion of the Year, Matt Willer  
Photography: Jason Bye, jasonbye.com

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recycled items, from old tyres to former fire doors.

“The Allotment Project is inclusive for all children and young people. We have students of all ages working alongside one another, those applying for top universities working alongside equally bright students who want have a career in agriculture,” he says.

“In the next few years I am very keen to replicate The Allotment Project in other secondary schools across Norfolk and I am hoping to create a regional charity that does just this. I am extremely

determined to achieve this, as it will be children and young people learning to lead more sustainable lives that will make the world a much better place.” ♦

**The Royal Horticultural Society’s School Gardeners of the Year competition 2019 is open for nominations. There are three categories: Young School Gardener; School Gardening Team and School Gardening Champion. Closing date is April 24, to enter or for tips on school gardening, see [schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk](http://schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk)**

## LET IT GROW!

Anyone can try their hand at growing vegetables – here are three to try, with tips from Guy Barter, RHS chief horticulturist



### Lettuce

Salad leaves fresh from the garden put supermarket leaves to shame. Simply sow the cheap seed every two weeks from March until August into

any garden soil, thin to allow 15cm between small plants and 25cm between larger ones, and 25cm between rows. The min-cos ‘Little Gem’ is perhaps the easiest lettuce, although ‘Salad Bowl’, a loose leaf lettuce runs it close.

### Courgettes

Plant seeds for this valuable tasty summer food in 9cm pots of peat-free potting



compost and keep in a warm bright place until the vigorous plant has filled the pot. It can then be planted outside – but it cannot get frosted. Three plants will provide more than enough courgettes. Look out for pretty plants which will grow up a wigwam of sturdy poles.

### Runner beans

Delicious and easily grown from three seeds sown at the base

of a cane. A dozen 2m canes, 30cm apart, in wigwams, will yield plenty of beans for most households. They will crop from July until October and need watering in dry spells. Remove all pods as ripe pods will suppress flowering bringing the harvest to an end. If only containers are available, French beans are best.

