

News

Thatu primes the pumps in South African school food gardens

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Grey water grows good food and teaches maths

In the South of England this spring, gardeners groaned and wondered how to keep their begonias blooming and their hostas healthy in the face of an announcement by Thames Water of a summer-long hosepipe ban. Meanwhile a few thousand miles away in South Africa low-income communities in much drier conditions are learning how to grow vegetables in school food gardens with the help of a British-based charity, Thatu.



Gardening in the arid environments of South African townships and informal settlements calls for unusual methods and innovation.

Through its funding, Thatu is trying to ensure that sustainable gardening techniques are built into schoolchildren's lessons and that food gardens are central to some school curriculum activities.

Margery Povall explained: "Thatu is providing cash to help start food gardens that can become self-sustaining and withstand the extreme weather conditions of South Africa. We are partnering local groups to start community school organic permaculture gardens in two areas. One is on the notoriously arid and inhospitable Cape Flats, just outside Cape Town, and the other is close to Johannesburg.

"The same principles of gardening in drought conditions apply here in southern England as in South Africa, but the South Africa conditions are tougher, the stakes are higher and the methods used are often very unusual and always very resourceful. For example, pupils bring "grey" water - used domestic water from bathing or washing - to water their school garden. Plastic bags and old tyres are used to build raised beds that retain water and channels are dug to divert rainwater to plants that need the most water. The pupils even improve their maths by calculating the volume of water needed per square foot of garden, and therefore how much money has been saved by using grey water."

Thatu is finding that its support of community food gardens can have a wide impact. It enables schools and community volunteers to learn new skills, and once established the gardens provide much needed nutrition and income.