

2025 Gardening Q&A Webinar - Questions



Practical tips for safe and effective school gardening

School gardens are a great way to get children outdoors, learning about where food comes from and developing lifelong healthy habits. But gardening also comes with questions – from managing allergies and dealing with curious wildlife, to caring for garden beds over the holidays.

A **Pick of the Crop Gardening Q&A Webinar**, hosted by Health and Wellbeing Queensland, was held on 21 October 2025, where horticultural experts Annette McFarlane (gardener, teacher, horticultural author and ABC radio gardening talkback presenter) and Keith Gilbert (Pick of the Crop Regional Coordinator, Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers Ltd) shared their knowledge and practical advice.

Here, we've captured some of the key questions and expert tips from the session to help teachers and garden coordinators keep school gardens safe, thriving and enjoyable for everyone.

Q: How can I deal with children who have allergic reactions to things in the garden, but who still want to garden?

- Discuss with parents and other staff and ensuring appropriate first aid, EpiPens and mobile phones are on hand
- Light coloured clothing (not florals or dark colours) should cover the legs and arms and include elasticized ankles and wrists
- Wear gloves, hats and in the case of highly allergic children, a face-net

- Wear insect repellent (note that this does **not** work for bees). Avoid perfumed sunscreens.
- Teach calmness around insects
- Invite a bee keeper to help educate the children
- Stingless native bees are less likely to cause allergic reactions, but some species do bite!

Q: How do we deal with snakes? Are there any snake repellent plants?

- Learn what snakes are found in your region and the threat they pose. Many snakes are harmless or very reluctant to bite. Removing less harmful snakes from the area can encourage other species to move in to take advantage of food sources and habitat.
- Teach children what to do if they see a snake – do not touch, stand still, move slowly away, report to the teacher
- Work with grounds staff to keep rat and mice populations under control
- Ensure compost and worm farms are actively breaking down and shut tight (some people fix mesh to the bottom of compost bin to deter critters)
- Keep pots, potting mix, fertilisers etc in sealed metal containers
- Keep areas around school gardens neat and tidy
- Invite in a snake catcher to educate children.

There is no evidence that particular plants actively repel snakes.

Tall grasses (lomandra, vetiver, dianella, lemon grass, citronella grass) may provide places for snakes to hide. Rock walls provide warmth and habitat for snakes.

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Q: What bush tucker plants and trees can we grow in our garden?

Vegetables or herbs:

- Coastal or beaded samphire (*Sarcocornia quinqueflora*)
- Millaa Millaa vine (*Elaeagnus triflora*)
- Native ginger (*Alpinia caerulea*)
- Native mint or river mint (*Mentha australis*)
- Native oregano or native round leaf mint (*Prostanthera rotundifolia*)
- Native pigface or karkalla (*Carpobrotus virescens* and *Carpobrotus rossii*)
- Native thyme (*Prostanthera incisa*)
- Native yams (*Dioscorea* species) Look for species native to your region.
- Saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia* or other genera depending on growing region).
- Sea celery or native parsley (*Apium* species)
- Warrigal greens (*Tetragonia tetragonoides*)
Note, this must be thoroughly cooked to remove oxalic acid. Boil, drain and rinse then add to a recipe as spinach.
- Water chestnut (*Eleocharis dulcis*)
- Yam daisy (*Microseris lanceolata*)

Shrubs and Trees:

- Davidson plum (*Davidsonia pruriens*)
- Finger limes (*Citrus australasica*) Desert limes and Gympie limes
- Lemon aspen (*Acronychia acidula*)
- Lemon myrtle (*Backhousia citriodora*)
- Macadamia nut (*Macadamia integrifolia*)
- Midyen berry (*Austromyrtus dulcis*)
- Native mulberry (*Pipturus argenteus*)
- Small leaf lillypilly (*Syzygium leuhmannii*)
- Small leaf tamarind (*Diploglottis campbellii*)

Additional ideas:

- Invite a guest speaker to talk about how Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities used local plants. Local knowledge is key!
- Where trees take a long time to fruit, consider purchasing fruit for use with students in the short term.
- The majority of wattle seeds are not edible and contain anti-nutrients, but *Acacia longifolia* ssp. *longifolia* (harvest in 2-3 years) and *Acacia victoriae* (harvest in 4-5 years) can be grown in drier inland regions. According to research by The University of Queensland, wattle seed must be roasted for 20 minutes at a temperature of at least 200 degrees.

Q: Do you have any suggestions as to what to do with vegetable garden beds over the Christmas holidays?

- Wicking gardens and gardens with auto-timer irrigation often produce a good harvest over the summer break
- Plant sweet potatoes, pumpkins, watermelons, rosella bushes or perennial crops that can be harvested when school returns
- Plant a green manure crop to dig back into the soil or to cut for compost/mulch in the new year. Produce/farm supply stores often sell seed of legume green manure crops. Take local advice as to what works well in your region
- Put the garden to rest by adding compost and covering with mulch.

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Q: Are there any plants to grow that can add nutrients to the soil?

- Legume green manure crops and any other plants (spare seed from flowers and vegetables) can be sown into beds. Prior to flowering, this greenery can be dug back into the soil to provide organic matter or slashed and laid on the surface as nutrient rich mulch.

Q: What trees can I try to grow that are shady, but have fruit or some gardening/cooking use? In Western Queensland they must survive 45 degree Summers and frost in Winter.

- Take advice from your local council. They often have a free tree program. Also enquire at your local nursery. Your success will largely depend on access to water.
- Options to consider:
 - Gumbi gumbi (*Pittosporum angustifolium*)
 - Lemon myrtle (*Backhousia citriodora*)
 - Lillypilly species (*Syzygium* and *Acmena*)
 - Olive (*Olea europaea*)
 - Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*)
 - Wattle (*Acacia longifolia* ssp. *longifolia* and *Acacia victoriae*). Roast seed at 200 degrees for 20 minutes
- Edible vines on a trellis may be a faster-growing option.

Q: Why do tropical apples fall soon after fruit forms?

- Ensure apples have a compatible cross-pollinating variety
- Use fruit fly baits year round
- Net entire trees or bag fruit immediately after fruit sets. Fruit fly can sting apple fruit when it is the size of a pea.

Q: Can treated timber be used for garden beds? If not, what's the best and most durable?

- Timber treated with Copper Chromium Arsenate (CCA) is not suitable for growing food crops or general use within schools. Alkaline Copper Quarternery (ACQ) treated timber is permitted (as at October 2025).
- Other durable materials include metal, bricks or wicking beds made from recycled intermediate bulk containers (IBCs), provided they have not previously held toxic materials and the outside is shielded in some way from sun exposure (e.g. timber etc).

Q: Who can I contact if I have further questions?

Please reach out to Annette

questions@annettemcfarlane.com or Keith directly:

Keith.potcgympie@bfvg.com.au.

You can also find more information at

<https://www.annettemcfarlane.com/> and

information on Pick of the Crop, see

www.hw.qld.gov.au/pick-of-the-crop.

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