

# LITTLE GROWERS

story time in the garden

## Project Pilot 2022 - 2023 Report



GEELONG  
REGIONAL  
LIBRARIES



Little Growers is a partnership project  
between Bellarine Community Health  
and Geelong Regional Libraries

## Executive Summary

### The Program

Little Growers was developed as a pilot program in 2022, to engage preschool children with exploring healthy sustainable food. Little Growers (LG) was designed as a Healthy Eating initiative within BCH's 2021-2025 Integrated Health Promotion (IHP) Plan, Live Well Bellarine (LWB). To support delivery of the program, a new partnership was formed between Bellarine Community Health (BCH) and Geelong Regional Libraries Corporation (GRLC). During 2022-23, LG was trialled at the Ocean Grove Youth Guerrilla Garden, then delivered at Portarlington Preschool with strong engagement and input from preschool staff. The program included an outdoor *Story Time in the Garden* facilitated by a GRLC Childrens and Youth Services (CYS) Librarian. This was followed by a hands-on *Get into the Garden* activity facilitated by a Healthy Communities Planner and/or preschool staff. Further support was provided to Portarlington Preschool to embed the activities into their ongoing learning program.

### Key Findings

84 children participated in Little Growers sessions, with 24 parents/carers and 6 educators engaging with the program. The program reached its target of engaging preschool children and families from the identified equity communities on the Bellarine. Parents/carers and educators indicated through anecdotal and survey feedback that the program was an enjoyable way to engage children with growing food, connecting with nature and exploring healthy eating through exposure to new vegetables. The participating preschool setting indicated that they would recommend the program to other settings. They believed it was beneficial and contributed to how their setting supported healthy eating and overall health and wellbeing.

The program has the potential to further increase the capacity of children and families to grow and eat sustainable healthy food and gain access to produce through food growing at the preschool setting or by accessing the Seed Library program. In order to determine the ability of the program to increase capacity and access as indicated in the program objectives, an impact evaluation is recommended to be undertaken upon implementation in additional settings.

### General Recommendations

- The Little Growers model is a recommended approach to engage preschool settings and families with growing food, connecting with nature and trying new vegetables.
- It is important to ensure that settings are supported to embed growing and food activities into their ongoing learning program to build staff capacity and ensure program sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction

Little Growers: Story Time in the Garden (Little Growers) was piloted on the Bellarine Peninsula between August 2022 and June 2023, as a new partnership project between Bellarine Community Health (BCH) and Geelong Regional Libraries Corporation (GRLC).

Little Growers is an initiative within BCH Healthy and Connected Communities (HCC) 2021-2025 Integrated Health Promotion (IHP) Plan, Live Well Bellarine (LWB). Healthy Eating is a key priority area within LWB and includes the objectives:

1. Strengthen the local food system through community partnerships which increase children, young people and families' access to healthy sustainable food
2. Build the capacity of children, young people and families to grow, source and eat healthy and sustainable food.

The GRLC Library Plan 2021-2025: Connecting and Thriving highlights that as an innovative partner, GRLC offers access and inclusion to communities with a special focus on health and wellbeing, neighbourhood connections and uplifting and sustainable places and spaces. Also, as part of GRLC's *Library of Things*, the newly established *Seed Library* fosters a culture of sharing seeds with local communities and promoting indoor-outdoor connections<sup>1</sup>.

Little Growers was proposed as an extension of GRLC's existing Story Time program, which is delivered both within GRLC Library branches and externally to education and early years settings within identified 'outreach' communities. GRLC's identified 'outreach' communities on the Bellarine align with BCH's identified equity communities, and include Northern Bellarine townships Portarlington, St Leonards, Drysdale and Clifton Springs<sup>2</sup>.

Between August and December 2022, Little Growers trialed three sessions at the Youth Garden located behind Ocean Grove Library, with the intention of engaging settings within the Northern Bellarine townships for ongoing delivery. Portarlington Preschool was engaged January 2023 and three Little Growers sessions (two with Story Times) were delivered between April and June 2023.



## 2. Program Rationale

Learnings from the 2017-2021 BCH IHP plan highlighted that early year's settings were responsive to support from BCH Healthy Communities Planners to increase and promote healthy eating with their children. Free and tailored resources and support to implement actions led to increased engagement. There were high levels of engagement with the Taste the Rainbow Placemat (developed by Golden Plains Shire) and interest from settings in further support to expose children to new vegetables, in fun and engaging ways.

Little Growers was designed to trial a new approach to engaging preschool settings with healthy eating, combining the learnings above with the Healthy Early Childhood Services Achievement Program Climate and Health Toolkit action areas, *Eat more Plants, Connect with Nature and Reduce Waste*<sup>3</sup>. By engaging with Little Growers there is opportunity for early years settings to consider embedding the Climate and Health action areas into their regular kinder program, which has the potential to be self-sustainable in the long term and contribute to a whole-of-setting and holistic approach to health and wellbeing.

By delivering sessions within early childhood settings within equity communities, there is an opportunity to address barriers of access to families, as the program can reach children and families where they are. During the pilot period, the program was able to engage the main preschool for families living in one of BCH's identified equity communities who experience higher levels of disadvantage.

There is also opportunity to utilise Little Growers to promote the GRLC Seed Library program. Early childhood settings and their families can find out how they can access free seeds from the Seed Library to grow food at home, as well as gain the skills to grow from seed, and return seeds to the Library.





### 3. Program Description

The Little Growers program provides preschool settings with facilitated *Story Time in the Garden* and *Get into the Garden* sessions, exploring growing food and caring for the planet. Little Growers demonstrates ways that preschool educators can bring a stronger focus on food growing and sustainability into their learning.

BCH piloted Little Growers (LG) at two community settings on the Bellarine Peninsula between August 2022 to June 2023, with delivery support from GRLC Childrens and Youth Services (CYS).

The Little Growers program (LG) was initially trialled at the Youth Guerrilla Garden, a youth-focused community garden, located behind Ocean Grove Library. Little Growers was then promoted directly to Northern Bellarine-based preschool settings, such as kindergartens and playgroups. Portarlington Preschool was the first setting to enquire about participating in the program.

The Program included the delivery of a *Story Time in the Garden* facilitated by a GRLC CYS Librarian in an outdoor space within the setting. *Story Times* included books, songs and engagement activities relating to food and sustainability themes. Themes include gardening, growing, seeds, vegetables, flowers, insects, and taking care of the planet.

The *Story Time in the Garden* was followed by a hands-on *Get into the Garden* activity facilitated by a Healthy Communities Planner and/or settings staff. Garden Activities may include planting seeds or seedlings, exploring the garden and finding insects, composting, building up soil, weeding, and sensory activities such as smelling and tasting edible plants.

Little Growers sessions were delivered for approximately 1-hour, with a 20–30-minute *Story Time* and 30-40 minute *Get into the Garden* activity. Sessions were delivered to each setting once a term, with sessions at the preschool being held over multiple days to capture children who attend on different days of the week.

In extension to the Little Growers program, BCH provided additional resources and capacity building to Portarlington Preschool educators to support them to embed a focus on food growing and sustainability into their regular learning program. This enabled preschool staff to facilitate Little Growers sessions during their regular program without direct support from BCH.

A collaborative resource, 'Little Growers Gardening and Storybook Activity Guide', was developed by BCH with support from GRLC in June 2023, to be utilised by settings to support their planning and implementation of garden and food activities into their program (See Appendix).



### Key Responsibilities of each party:

#### *BCH Healthy Communities Planner*

- Coordinated the delivery of the LG program, including leading the facilitation of Get into the Garden as needed. Settings staff may facilitate Get into the Garden with or without the direct support of BCH.
- Provided the materials to facilitate the Get into the Garden activity, including any gardening equipment, seeds and seedlings, and any other materials that may be needed.
- Lead the development and distribution of LG promotional materials in line with GRLC and BCH communication policy and processes.
- Engaged with Bellarine community settings, including preschools and playgroups, in coordination with GRLC CYS Librarian.
- Lead the coordination of the LG program calendar, including the arrangement and booking of sessions with community settings, in consultation with GRLC CYS Librarian.
- Lead the development of the evaluation plan and report for the LG program, including gathering feedback and evaluation findings from community settings.

#### *GRLC CYS Librarian*

- Supported the delivery of the LG program, including leading the facilitation of the Story Time in the Garden.
- Provided the materials to facilitate the Story Time in the Garden, including story books, songs, and other engagement activities within the Library Story Time kit.
- Supported the development and distribution of the LG program promotional materials in line with GRLC and BCH communications policy and processes.
- Supported BCH in the development of the evaluation plan and report for the LG program as needed, including gathering feedback and evaluation findings from community settings.





## 4. Program Costs

Children’s gardening and educational resources were purchased to support the delivery of Little Growers.

These included:

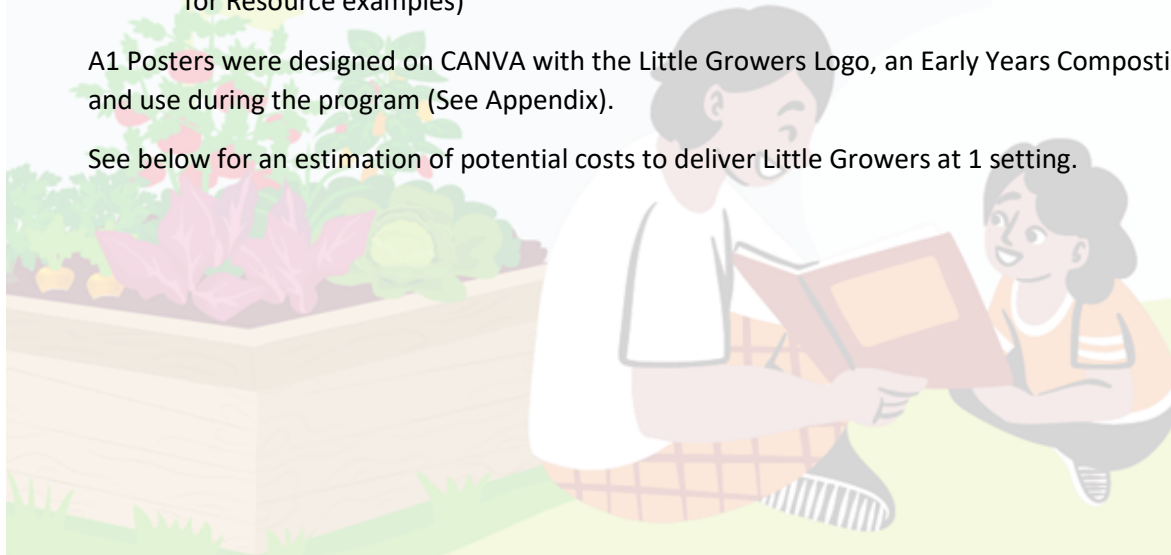
- Children’s gardening sets, including small trowel, gardening fork, watering can and gardening gloves
- Children’s large magnifying glasses
- Wooden “What Season is it?” and “What is the Weather” and “Life Cycle of a Sunflower” educational disks
- Various gardening and growing themed story books

A variety of supporting resources were also provided to support settings to embed Little Growers into their practice. These included:

- *Little Veggie Patch Co. Grow. Food. Anywhere.* gardening book
- *Stephanie Alexander Seasonal Food and Gardening for the Early Years* Books 1-3 which align with the Early Years Learning Framework and cover all aspects of growing and cooking with a garden within a kinder program.
- The *Taste the Rainbow Placemat* continues to be a useful tool for early childhood settings to implement alongside activities that increase exposure to new and different vegetables. This resource can be used alongside garden and growing activities to support eating what is grown in the garden. (See Appendix for Resource examples)

A1 Posters were designed on CANVA with the Little Growers Logo, an Early Years Composting and Lasagne Gardening and printed on Corflute for settings to display and use during the program (See Appendix).

See below for an estimation of potential costs to deliver Little Growers at 1 setting.





**Potential Costs**

Item	Quantity	Cost
Seedlings	10	\$38.51
Gardening sets	10	\$50.00
Storybooks	3	\$92.16
Magnifying glasses	10	\$35.00
Wooden Discs	10	\$42.50
Corflute Signs	3	\$75.00
<b>Supporting resources</b>		
Gardening and Cooking books	4	\$148.65
Taste the Rainbow Placemats and 'I tried it' stickers	30 Placemats 175 Stickers	\$81.00

Note: Portarlington Preschool requested additional support to set up the growing space within their centre. This required sourcing soil and other organic materials to set up the beds ready for planting. Portarlington Preschool was able to allocate some budget towards gardening equipment and materials. Portarlington Preschool, managed by Bethany (now Meli), was not eligible to apply for a City of Greater Geelong Community Grant.



## 5. Program Pilot findings

### Reach

**84 children through 5 collaborative Little Growers Storytime sessions and 1 additional workshop.**

Sessions were delivered at 2 locations, Ocean Grove Youth Garden and Portarlington Preschool.

Portarlington Preschool – Engaged 50 children aged 3-5 years, 4 parents/carers

Ocean Grove Library/ Youth Guerrilla Garden – Engaged 34 children aged 0-5 years, 20 parents/carers, 6 educators/staff

### Anecdotal and Observational Feedback

#### Ocean Grove Library/Youth Garden parents/carers:

“Since the last session, (our child) has been more interested in talking about veggies and trying them”

Main reason for coming was “to spend time in a garden” or “spend time in nature”

Topics they would like to explore included “growing vegetables, the role of bees, birds and insects in the garden, eating food from the garden, and playing in nature”

Activities they would like to try “growing herbs, caring for a vegetable garden, using food waste in the garden”

“The eating the rainbow poster has been so helpful at dinner time! My three-year-old has been keen to try new vegetables so that he can put a sticker on the poster”





**Portarlington Preschool Staff:**

The children all really enjoyed the process of learning about the lasagne method and are **very excited to grow some veggies**.

They are all throwing ideas out on **what we can cook** once the veggies have grown.

We have been very eager to set up our garden beds and embed that into our practice but having **the support has been amazing**.

The children have been able to learn **where their food comes from**.

It has sparked up conversation between all the children and the teachers about **yummy healthy foods** and what we can make with the foods we have grown. One child said they would love to make pizza with the fresh oregano that we have planted.

It has been great to see the children learning and **having fun** in these sessions.

The Little Growers Program has been great for the preschool community and has **brought the children and families together** to take part in these sessions.

The children have learnt so much from reading stories about where food comes from and has given them really hands on valuable learning experiences which we hope can only **spark a love for healthy eating** and a healthy lifestyle.

It has been **valuable for our little community**, and having the families come and participate and help has been incredible.



### Community Settings Partnership Survey:

In July 2023, a survey was sent to representatives from community settings working with BCH HCC on actions within the Live Well Bellarine IHP Plan. The manager of Portarlinton Preschool responded, highlighting:

- That the partnership between Portarlinton Preschool and the HCC was 'beneficial', saying, "(we have been) planting lots of fruits, vegetables and herbs in our garden beds, to then teach the children about healthy eating, and eating the colours of the rainbow".
- Since working together, changes to how the setting promotes health and wellbeing for children has included, "showing the children where fruits and vegetables come from, and how we look after them has opened up conversations around healthy eating".
- They would recommend the program to another setting, saying "(Facilitator) has been so hands on and so knowledgeable. It has been great working with (them) this year, the sessions with the children have been amazing. Families have loved it".

## 6. Discussion

There was strong appetite from families and early years settings for programs which provide opportunities for children to connect with nature, engage with growing food, and creative ways to try new foods/veggies.

Based on anecdotal and observational feedback received from both parents/carers and preschool staff, the Little Growers program has the potential to meet the Program objectives:

- Increase the capacity of preschool children aged 3-5 years to grow and eat sustainable and healthy food.
- Preschool children and their families gain access to local sustainable food through community gardens and growing spaces.

Parent/carers and preschool staff indicated that the Little Growers program was beneficial in engaging their children in a nature, teaching them about growing food and exposing them to healthy food and tasting new vegetables. Preschool settings felt supported and believed the program was valuable for their children.

GRLC was found to be a worthwhile partner organisation to collaborate on community-based health promoting initiatives. They are a key organisation in promoting the health and wellbeing of the community and have a focus on reaching identified equity communities.

Overall, Little Growers was demonstrated to be a valuable and promising program for preschool settings and successfully engaged preschool children with participating in growing and exploring eating sustainable healthy food. The program has the potential to further increase the capacity of children and families to



grow and eat sustainable healthy food and gain access to produce through food growing at the preschool setting or by accessing the Seed Library program. In order to determine the ability of the program to increase capacity and access as indicated in the program objectives, an impact evaluation is recommended to be undertaken as additional settings are engaged in the program.

## 7. Recommendations

### General Recommendations for program replication

- The Little Growers model is a recommended approach to engage preschool families and settings with growing food, connecting with nature and trying new foods.
- It is important to ensure that settings are supported to embed growing and food activities into their ongoing learning program to build staff capacity and ensure program sustainability.

### Program Specific recommendations

- **Continue to implement the program** - Little Growers to move from the pilot phase to be delivered as an ongoing program. Little Growers to continue to be delivered in Preschool settings within the Northern Bellarine.
- **Continue to deliver the program with support from Geelong Regional Libraries** – BCH to continue to deliver the program with support from GRLC. To update Project Agreement with GRLC Childrens and Youth Services to outline the ongoing delivery of the program, including key roles and responsibilities of each organisation. This includes CYS delivery of the Story Time component of the program, and HCCT or settings staff to deliver Get into the Garden. HCCT to coordinate the implementation of the overall program with settings.
- **Implement a comprehensive evaluation strategy for the program** – To plan and implement an impact evaluation for the program. To collect impact evaluation data to complement ongoing process data collection. This will contribute to the existing anecdotal and observational evidence to continue to determine the effectiveness and impact of the program for families and settings.



## 8. Conclusion

Little Growers was shown to be a well-received and promising program to engage preschool settings with sustainable food actions and support them to embed actions into their service. The program successfully engaged preschool children through the Story time and Get into the Garden activities to explore growing and eating sustainable healthy food. In order to determine the ability of the program to increase the capacity of children and families to grow and eat sustainable healthy food and to gain access to produce, an impact evaluation is recommended to be undertaken.





## 9. References

[1] Geelong Regional Libraries, Seed Library, <https://www.grlc.vic.gov.au/seed-library-1>

[2] Bellarine Community Health, 2022, Equity Tool

[3] Cancer Council Victoria, Achievement Program, <https://www.achievementprogram.health.vic.gov.au/climate-health>



# 10. Appendix

## Little Growers Corflute Sign designs

### HOW TO MAKE GOOD COMPOST



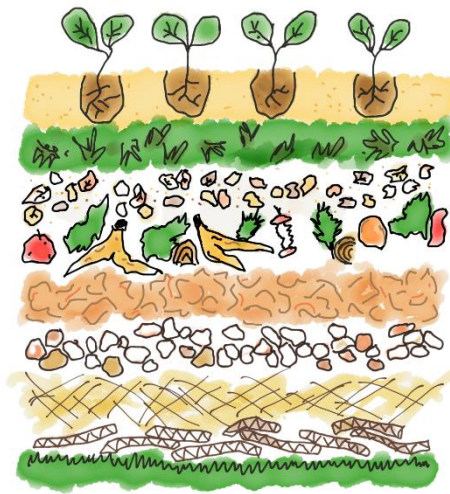
1. ADD A MIX OF **BROWNS** (CARBON) AND **GREENS** (NITROGEN).  
**BROWNS** = MULCH, STRAW, CARDBOARD, BROWN LEAVES  
**GREENS** = FOOD SCRAPS, GRASS CLIPPINGS, MANURE, SEAGRASS  
 YOU WANT MORE **BROWNS** THAN **GREENS** SO IT DOESN'T GET STINKY!
2. CHOP IT UP
3. **NO MEAT, DAIRY, ONION OR CITRUS**
4. **NO WEEDS OR PLASTIC**
5. TURN COMPOST OFTEN TO GIVE IT AIR
6. GIVE COMPOST A WATER IF IT IS DRY
7. ADD SOAKED MANURE FOR ADDED GOODNESS
8. LET IT REST BEFORE YOU USE IT IN THE GARDEN




  
Little Growers is a partnership project from Bellarine Community Health and Geelong Regional Libraries

### HOW TO MAKE A LASAGNE GARDEN


THESE KINDS OF GARDENS HAVE LAYERS LIKE A LASAGNE. THEY ARE MADE OF A LAYER OF **GREENS** AND A LAYER OF **BROWNS**.



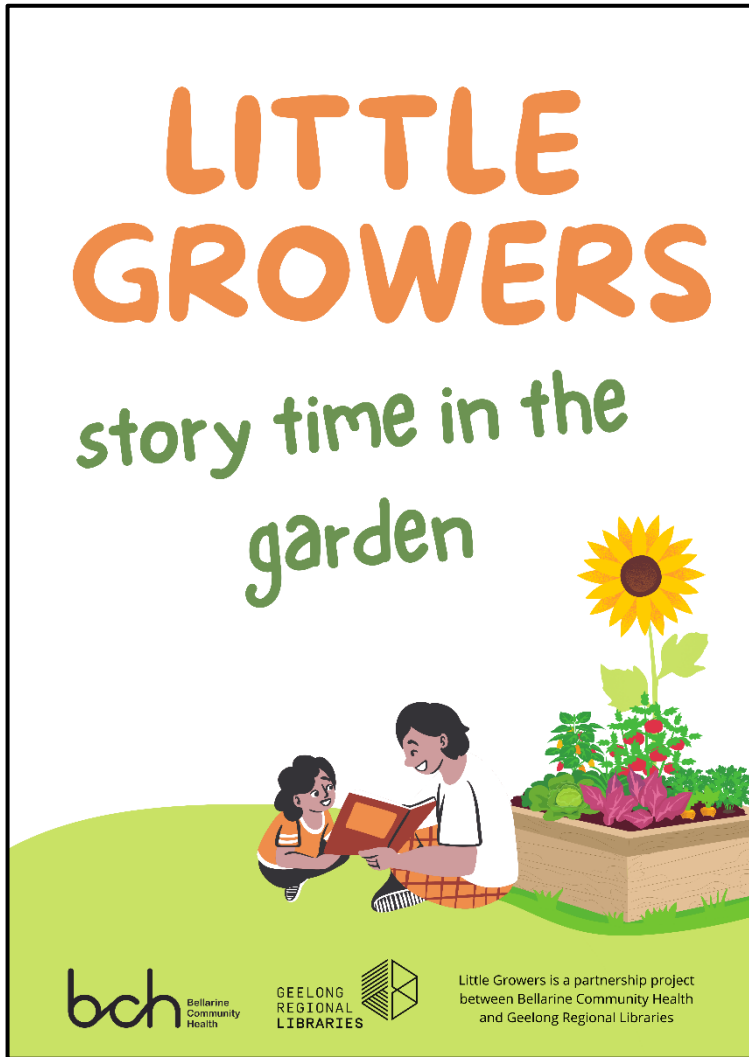
**FOR EXAMPLE:**

- MULCH AND WORM CASTINGS
- SEAGRASS
- BROWN LEAVES
- FOOD SCRAPS OR COMPOST
- MULCH
- MANURE
- STRAW OR HAY
- CARDBOARD
- GRASS CLIPPINGS

**HOW DOES IT WORK?**  
**GREENS** are full of NITROGEN  
**BROWNS** are full of CARBON  
 Together they give the garden everything it needs to GROW.

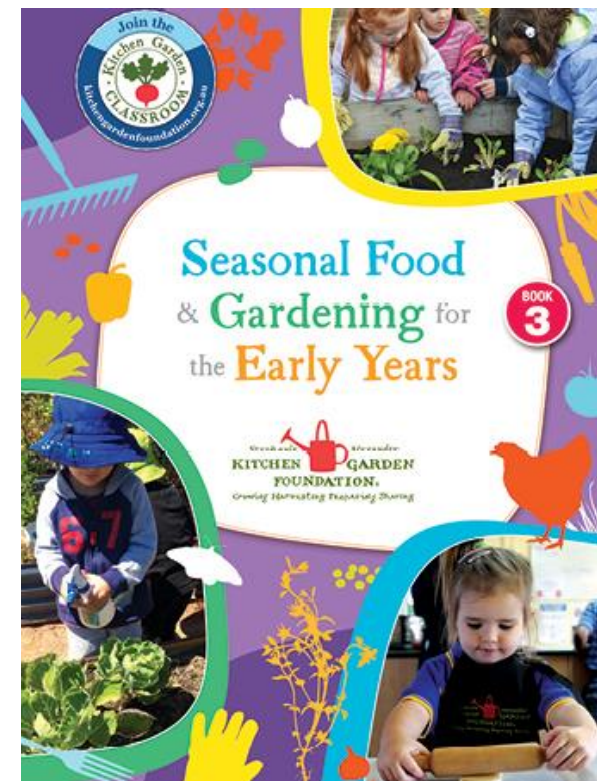
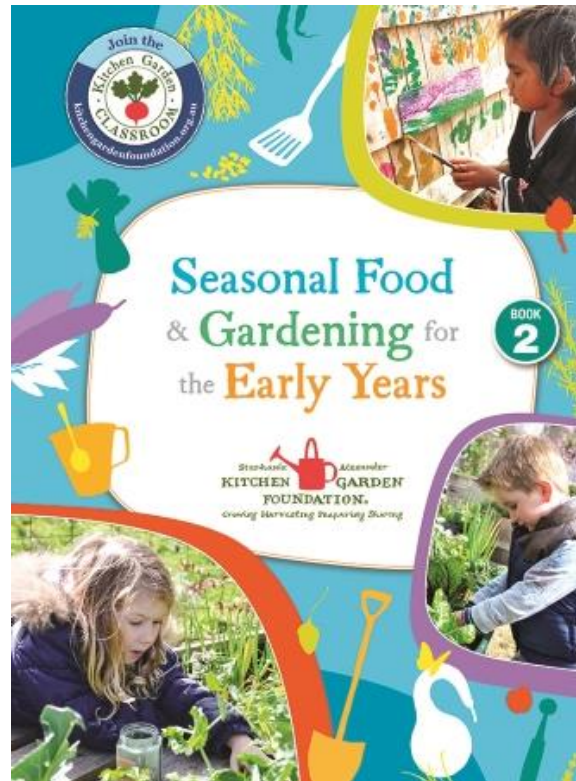
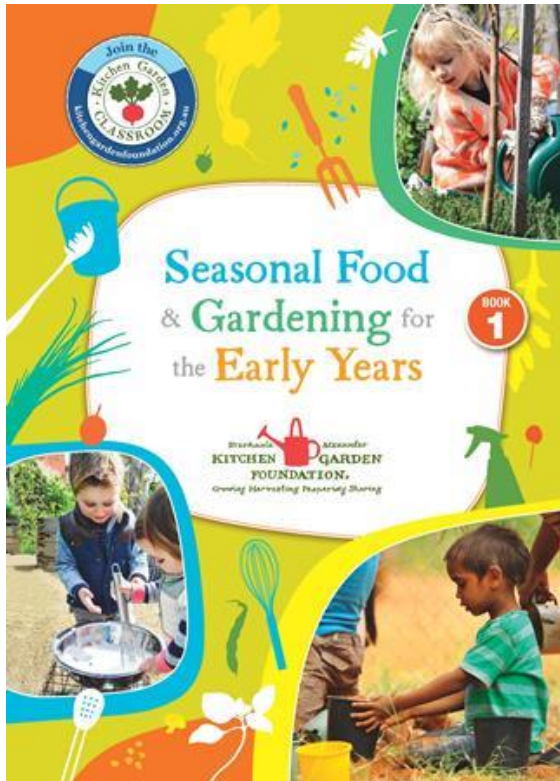

  
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Little Growers Corflute Sign design





Stephanie Alexander Seasonal Food & Gardening for the Early Years Books 1-3 (Source: [www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/shop](http://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/shop))



Little

Veggie Patch co. Grow. Food. Anywhere. (Source: [littleveggiepatchco.com.au/collections/our-books](http://littleveggiepatchco.com.au/collections/our-books))

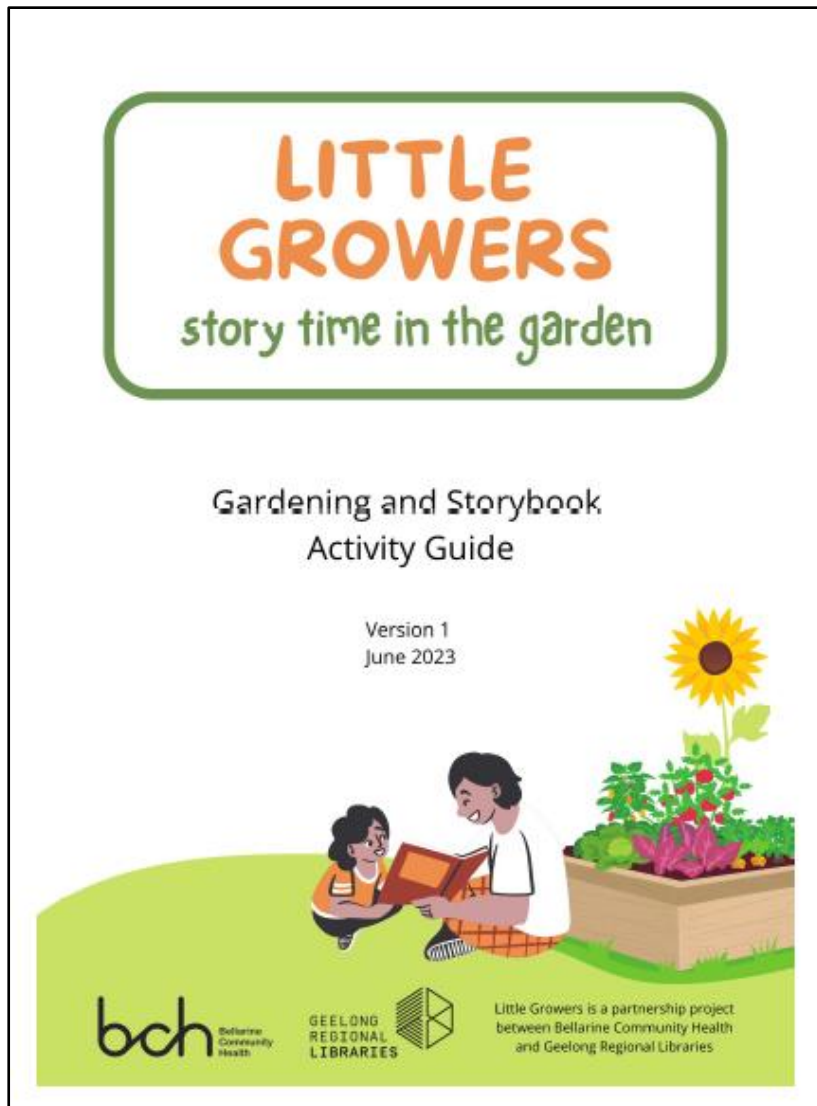


Taste the Rainbow Placemat (Source: Golden Plains Shire)





Little Growers Gardening and Storybook Resource excerpt



**LITTLE GROWERS** story time in the garden

SEASON	ACTIVITY	BORROW FROM THE LIBRARY
 <b>SUMMER</b> Dec-Feb	<b>Build</b> A bean trellis	Jenkins, Martin 2019. <i>Caterpillar and Bean: A First Science Storybook</i> . Candlewick Press. Themes: garden, insects, vegetables, science.
	<b>Plant vegetables</b> Beans Carrots Lettuce	Clare, Justine 2019. <i>A Banana is a Banana</i> . Penguin Books Australia. Themes: vegetables, song.  <i>Seeds from the Seed Library</i> Did you know that you can borrow seeds for free from your local library. You can also give back seeds for others in your community to borrow.
	<b>Make</b> Pizzas Use tomatoes & basil	Child, Lauren 2003. <i>I Will Not Ever Eat a Tomato</i> . Candlewick Press. Themes: trying new foods, fun.
	<b>Cook</b> Pumpkin scones	
	<b>Make</b> A snack platter Use capsicum, cucumber, cherry tomatoes	Alexandre, Preeya 2019. <i>Rainbow Plate</i> . Little Steps Publishing. Themes: healthy eating, vegetables, colours.
	<b>Make</b> An edible vegetable artwork	Child, Lauren 2003. <i>I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato</i> . Candlewick Press. Themes: trying new foods, fun.  Smallman, Steve 2014. <i>Eat Your Greens, Goldilocks</i> . QED Publishing. Themes: vegetables, healthy eating.
Other ideas:		

1

Check out your closest library for more books to choose from!