

This year, our competition was funded by a Community Grant of £300 from Midcounties Coop: compost was provided by Farlow Farm Nursery. The report below was submitted to Midcounties Coop at the end of the competition for posting on its website.

How did our grant help?

For the past four years, Cleobury Gardeners has run a project entitled Learning to Grow Food, aimed at the nurseries and primary schools within Cleobury Mortimer and the outlying villages, as well as the school for students with special educational needs and disabilities that takes students from these localities. It reaches around 100 youngsters from the ages of 6 months to 11 years, with the special schools students averaging 15 years upwards who are developing the skills to look after themselves as they prepare for independent living.

One of our key objectives as an organisation is to promote interest in and knowledge of horticulture and gardening in the community, including among the youngest members of our society. The emphasis in Learning to Grow Food is on developing children's awareness, knowledge and understanding of food supply and the food that they eat, of particular importance in the current climate. A different brief is set each year, which also reflects the national requirements that nurseries and schools are required to pursue in their curricula.

The funding this year supported a brief that centred on developing the concept of varieties of the same food product, focusing on growing potato tubers so the children begin to understand that different varieties of seed potatoes will produce potatoes with different characteristics, for example:

- whether they vary in how easy or difficult they are to grow
- whether they develop diseases when growing, such as potato blight or insect infestations
- whether they all yield differing or similar amounts of new potatoes
- whether the potatoes are easy or difficult to prepare for cooking
- how well they respond to different cooking methods
- whether they vary from each other in terms of colour, taste and texture.

We are fortunate that we have strong support from Farlow Farm Nursery each year that supplies compost for our projects. The funding we were awarded by the Midcounties Coop Community Grant meant we were able to provide each of the nurseries and schools in late February with several tubers of varying sizes of four different potato varieties - Red Duke of York, Swift, Casablanca and Winston. These 'first early' varieties are faster growing and

ready to harvest in as little as 12 weeks, usually around midsummer, so the crops would be ready for judging when we visited to judge the outcomes in mid-July. The plants take up less space, so they are useful for the small gardens and troughs that some nurseries and schools have or can also be grown in containers for those that don't.

In addition, the funding also supports any ongoing material requirements but is mainly used for certificates and prizes. We try to provide prizes that are long-lasting, such as well-made trowels, hand forks and garden forks, propagators, mini green houses and other items that enable gardening to continue to be included in the curriculum. This year, for the first time we were able to purchase a range of high quality books relevant to the ages of the entrants - books published by the National Trust for the youngest children and by the Royal Horticultural Society for the schools in the primary and special school category. They included books that looked more broadly at gardening and growing plants as well as pests and diseases, insect life below ground in our gardens, trees, and the impact of the climate on plants, including those grown for food. Winners, runners up and highly commended entries received packs of these books for their libraries so everyone can read them and generate even more interest in, and understanding of, growing food.

The project this year was our most successful to date, with entrants spanning 6 months of age to 16. We had entries from two pre-school nurseries and three from nursery/ reception class children, all following the Early Years Foundation Stage of learning. In the schools, we had six following the National Curriculum. So often, activities such as this project are thought to be extra-curricular, but the entrants were clear that they had successfully combined it with the Government's curriculum requirements: thus, it was integral to their work rather than an add-on. One school used it also within their Forest School programme and another covered it additionally in their gardening club for 8 to 10 year-olds.

Tell us the outcome of your project

All of the entrants grew their potatoes successfully, with their progress recorded in their diaries/logs with photographs, drawings, writing, evidence of using information technology to research and in graphical representation of results on growth and on taste testing. Yields were generally good per plant, although the hot weather was a challenge, especially during holiday periods, but they all ensured some watering would take place.

A particular requirement was that they were required to cook the potatoes they had grown for taste testing, so they could explore the impact of variety of potato on sensory characteristics of taste, smell and appearance. We provided guidance on sensory testing and all undertook this very complex process very successfully, even the smallest children. They prepared the tubers, learning that green potatoes contain solanine and so shouldn't

be eaten due to their toxicity, and then boiled them, also mashed them (with and without skins) and some roasted them, depending on the cooking facilities available to them. They ranked the cooked potatoes using a 1 to 5 scale, replicating methods used in the food industry, and explored how tastes differ from one taster to another.

Outcomes were judged by members of Cleobury Gardeners visiting in week beginning 7 July. It was a very challenging exercise since the outcomes were all of a very high standard!

Tell us your success story

This programme of annual competitions has grown in popularity and the entrants enjoy using it in a variety of ways, depending on the age and ability of their children and students, to complement their learning. As soon as judging is over, they are all asking what they'll be asked to do next year!

There are numerous examples of their achievements. One nursery talks of the fact that they, children and staff alike, really enjoyed themselves. Another nursery engaged in role play of Queen Elizabeth 1 and Sir Walter Raleigh following a tale that he had brought potatoes back from the Americas, and asked the chef to cook them for the Queen: however, he mistakenly cooked the leaves rather than the tubers with a potentially life and death situation for Her Majesty! At the Forest School's site, the children cooked their potatoes in a fire and enjoyed eating them outside. In the special school, the boys were able to cook their potatoes in a specialist facility so they developed recipes for potato salads, and also mashed potatoes with a variety of ingredients such as fried onion, to enhance the flavour.

The book prizes and certificates were awarded as follows:

Pre-school:

Winners - Clee Hill Community Academy - Reception and class 1 (Forest School)

Joint runners-up - Stottesdon Gateway Nursery and Ever After Day Nursery

Highly commended - Abkats Nursery

Schools:

Winners - Kinlet C of E Primary School

Joint runners-up - Clee Hill Community Academy - class 3 and Stottesdon Gardening Club

Highly commended: Farlow C of E Primary School and Wyre Forest Special School

Learning to Grow food has made a huge impact on all the nurseries and schools that enter, which includes almost all of those in the surrounding area. One or two were unable to take part this year due to staff absence for long periods, but they all say the same thing – roll on Learning to Grow Food 2026!