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How does our garden grow?

Over the next three months, Sue Cowley, Chairperson of Stanton Drew and Pensford Pre-school in Somerset reveals how they turned a weedy strip of land into a real garden

Stanton Drew and Pensford Pre-school is a committee-run, village playgroup, located in the Chew Valley, an area of green belt just south of Bristol. Our pre-school has been serving the local community for more than 40 years and is based in the Parish Hall, at the centre of the village. The pre-school runs five mornings a week, for children aged two and a half upwards. We currently have 18 children attending the setting. We were really excited when the Parish Hall Committee offered us a small strip of land on which to build a garden for the children. The space runs between the side of the hall building and the wall bordering the road. However, the land is not without its challenges – it's small and has a tarmac base; as well as being weedy, with an unattractive oil tank at the end.



Why create a garden?

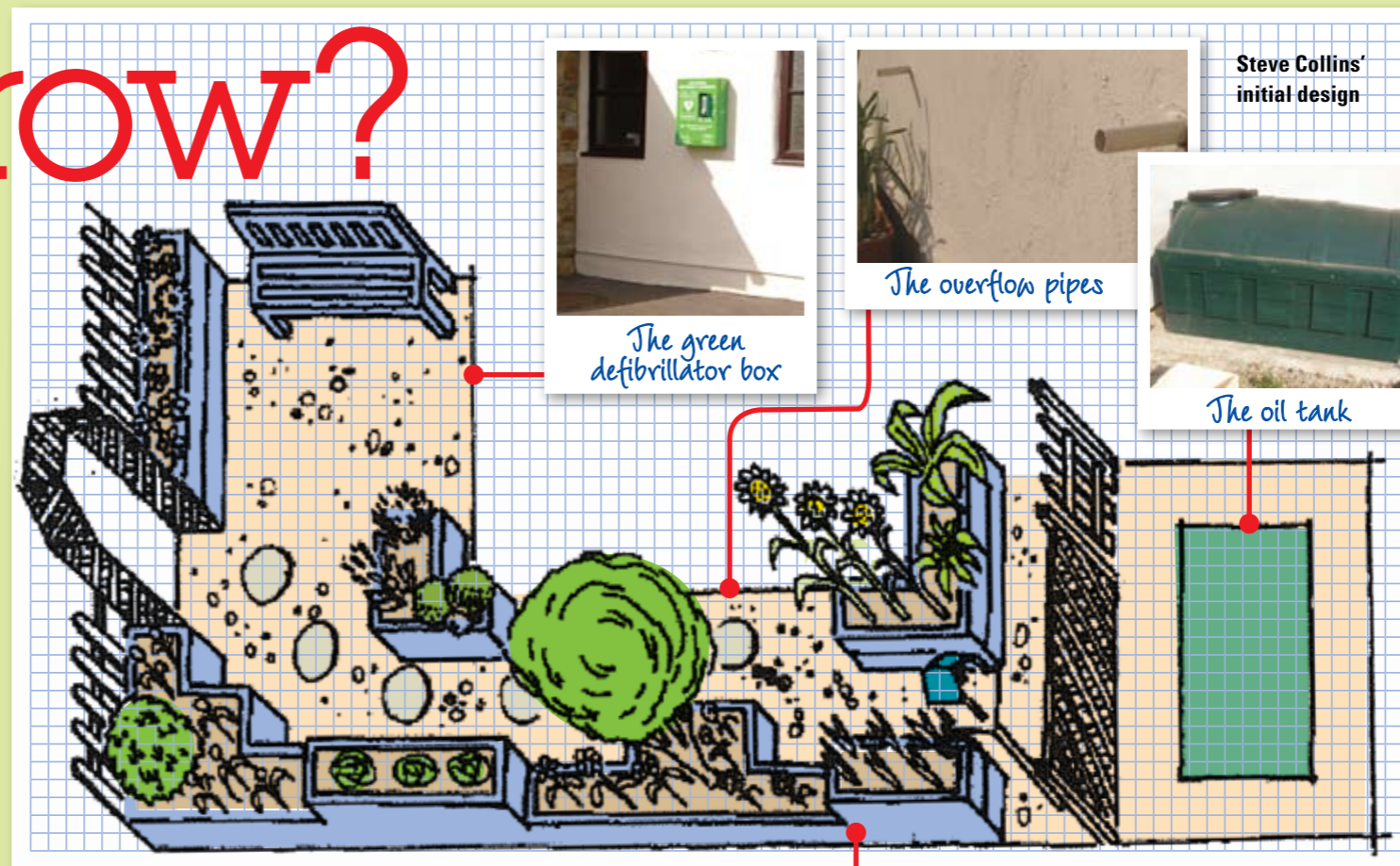
The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidance states that settings 'must have access to an outdoor play area'. Although our pre-school has access to an open area, this is basically a patch of bumpy field, and the children

- ▲ Our 'outdoor play' area
- ◀ The strip of land for our garden

have to cross the car park to reach it. The idea of 'a garden of our own', right next to the pre-school building, immediately excited our imaginations.

A garden is the perfect place for children to explore, experiment, and learn about their world through playing in it. One of our staff runs a local plant nursery, and our children already grow plants to take home. But we are looking forward to flowers, fruit and vegetables grown in our own garden. We also want to encourage the children to learn about the wildlife that lives all around us.

Our garden will help us to meet many of the areas of learning and development set out in the EYFS.



Steve Collins' initial design

The green defibrillator box

The overflow pipes

The oil tank

The low wall

The challenges

1 Financing

The total cost of the project was estimated to be around £1,250. Thanks to donations from local businesses and villagers, we are spending much less money than we originally thought we would have to. For example:

- two local construction firms are providing us with free building materials
- a local garden centre is giving us a £100 voucher to spend
- our local council are looking into offering us some funding
- the Hall Committee are giving us some spare gravel
- parents and volunteers are offering time, labour and donations of materials
- any extra money that we need for the project will come from various fund-raising events.

2 Risk assessment

We have identified various risks that we will have to make safe. These are:

- the oil tank – we will put a trellis and gate in front of this to keep the children out, but still leave access for the tank to be filled
- three overflow pipes sticking out from the wall
- these will be shortened, covered with foam, and turned into a fun 'feature'
- various materials stored on site – we will clear these away or utilise them during our makeover
- the low wall bordering the road – we have decided to raise the height of this using trellis.

It is also vital that we do not block the view of the bright, green defibrillator box. This is an important resource for rural communities, which are miles from the nearest hospital.

When the garden is complete, we

- In our garden, the children will:
- explore the world around them, and delight in new experiences
 - develop a sense of care and concern for others, for living things and for the environment
 - learn how to control tools and equipment safely
 - develop an understanding of growth, decay and changes over time
 - understand about the seasons
 - respond using all of their senses.

Getting started

Initially, we had to work out what we wanted, and how we would pay for it. Steve Collins, a local garden designer, kindly drew some plans for us – free of charge. We talked about the plans and made a few changes. We cut a couple of the raised beds, which you can see in Steve's plan, to create a more open space. We added extra wildlife features, such as a log pile, a bug bench and a water feature. Then we set a date to get started.

will carry out a full risk assessment, before letting the children explore.

3 Paperwork

We asked the Hall Committee to approve the plans, which they did, then we sent them to the local authority, and informed Ofsted that we are making 'significant changes' to the setting. I was keen to stress that these were very positive changes.

Getting children involved

During sessions, the children have talked about their ideas for the garden and have been growing plants for planting out. Lynne Willmott, our setting leader, is keen to have water in the garden. We will line one of the raised beds with pond liner, and fit a strong plastic grid over the top to make it safe.

Getting parents involved

We have let parents know about our plans through our regular newsletter. We have also sent out a letter asking for volunteers to come to a special 'garden makeover' day, and for donations of materials. With everyone lending a hand, we are hoping to have a new garden in no time at all.

Find out how our project is progressing in next month's issue.

With thanks to:

- Steve Collins (email gardensbystevcollins@hotmail.com)
- Mark Vears and Vears Ltd (visit www.vearsltd.co.uk)
- R O Dando (email corinne@dando.org.uk)
- Whitehall Garden Centre (www.whitehallgardencentre.co.uk)
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