

BAGS FOR *Life*

There are numerous veg growing initiatives across the country, but one in Cornwall offers significant rewards for both the recipients and producers involved. Geoff Hodge meets the founder to find out more about this inspiring project



Talk to anyone who knows about gardening and they'll tell you it's good for mind, body and soul. Talk to grow-your-owners and they'll say that cultivating and eating your own food is good for your health. When you speak to Ken Radford he maintains that gardening is the best medicine for people with disabilities and for integrating those who have special needs with society. In fact, his enthusiasm for this is infectious.

Ken is the manager of People & Gardens in Cornwall, a project that provides day-care services for those with physical and emotional impairments. The scheme promotes wellbeing through gardening and group activities within a real working environment. It is run by and for individuals whose lives have been affected by a disability. Ken believes that horticultural activities can make you feel good about yourself. "I'm a gardener and a grower – and now, apparently, a greengrocer, too." The People &



Gardens initiative has close links with the Eden Project in Cornwall and is based at its Watering Lane Nursery. People who come and work at the scheme have the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills that can help get them back into work, education or, sometimes more importantly, to aid their integration into society. Their main job is to help the Eden Project's team get plants ready for display at this world famous attraction.

Veg bag scheme

In May 2009, People & Gardens launched its Quality of Life Veg Bag Scheme, set up to provide opportunity through participation and employment. "We believe it helps to change the lives of disadvantaged people," Ken says. "The project does this through the full cycle of growing and selling vegetables – from sowing seeds and potting on to harvesting and packing the veg bags." The scheme



GIY (GROW IT YOURSELF)

- The first vegetable box scheme was set up in 1992, and there are now more than 500 operating across the UK.
- Grow-your-owners may be interested in setting up their own veg bag or box scheme. The Organic Vegetables Studies Survey found that 1 hectare of land produces enough for 60 veg boxes and this could produce an income of around £25,000.
- Most box schemes include staples, such as potatoes, carrots and onions, and a range of seasonal veg with prices varying from £7.50-£20. Look at other schemes in your area to get an idea of what to put in your box. You can find these listed on vegbox-recipes.co.uk.
- Local food is now a major growth area and selling your produce at a local farmers' market or similar outlet is within the reach of anybody who can provide enough. You can find out more from The Local Food Community (freerangereview.com), Making Local Food Work (makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk), Country Markets (country-markets.co.uk) and the Boxscheme Green & Organic directory where anyone can submit their organic veg box scheme (boxscheme.org).
- Food Safety, Health and Safety and Weights and Measures will be the main areas of legislation you will need to be aware of. Similarly, you may be required to check with Trading Standards and you will be subject to the 2006 Food Hygiene Regulations; find out more at food.gov.uk.



"IT'S WHAT'S IN THE BAG THAT IS IMPORTANT TO US – AND WHAT IT MEANS SOCIALLY"

supplies excellent quality produce for the Eden Project's kitchens and staff, to those involved with People & Gardens, and their families. It currently produces 70 bags every fortnight.

Following its success over the last six months – both for the service users and its popularity with those taking the produce – Ken wants to double its production. "We could then start selling them to people in the community – but we would need a van and a driver to deliver them. This target is achievable and hopefully we'll be able to do this by the spring." There are many people nearby and others in local social services that are very interested in having a regular supply of fresh veg. "But we need to be able to walk before we can run. The operation has to be professional and organised – both for the sake of the business and for the service users, as they need structure in their lives to ensure they can recover from whatever ailment is affecting them." Vegetables are

grown all year round and the scheme usually provides all the produce for the bags, although some local organic veg may be bought in to supplement what's being grown and to ensure there is plenty of variety 52 weeks of the year. "The only complaint we've had is that the bags contain too much, even though we asked people what they wanted!" Ken said. At this time of year a typical veg bag contains 1.6kg (3.5lb) potatoes, 500g (1lb) carrots, 500g (1lb) red onions (the staples that everyone wants), plus six or seven items from a list including fennel, white cabbage, cucumber, lettuce or salad leaves, lemon grass, swede, turnips, a squash and herbs – both cut and potted plants. Those participating in the Scheme pay just £21.70 a month. Ken is now looking to provide a large and a small bag for those who can't get through the current quantity and to possibly provide some flexibility, so people can choose ten items from a list of around 15. Growing fruit for the scheme is

also on the cards. Rhubarb plants were cultivated from seed in 2008 and will be ready for picking for the first time this year. People & Gardens have 150 crowns, so there should be plenty to go round. Ken is also considering growing strawberries, but this isn't straightforward as there are packaging and transport problems with such a soft fruit.

"It's what's in the bag that is important to us – and what it means socially," he says. "It's not just a container full of veg – it's the embodiment of the whole project," Ken says.

The vegetables are grown in a huge greenhouse (about the size of half a football pitch), nine large polytunnels and on a one-acre field. "Having all this room is important as it gives people their own space – individuals with challenging behaviour must not feel claustrophobic or hemmed in." Under cover, most crops are grown in pots – mainly recycled from the Eden Project. This makes it easier for the users, as



“ THE PROJECT HAS HELPED 150 PEOPLE MAKE REAL IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR DAILY LIVES”



everything can be carefully arranged, which helps to ensure things run smoothly and eliminates stress. It has the added advantage of allowing those with physical disabilities to work at a height suitable for their needs.

Ken fully understands the importance of the work carried out by the project and the Veg Bag Scheme. He has suffered a nervous breakdown and, as a result, couldn't get a job as no one would employ him. So he set up his own garden landscape company. He started to take on people with disabilities and was contacted by social services to see if he could also help individuals with special needs and those who didn't fit in with social 'norms'. Soon he began a project within his local community and became a role model for those with problems.

During the ten years that People & Gardens has been established, it has helped more than 150 people make real improvements in their daily lives. However, Ken laments the fact that the scheme cannot help everyone. "We're not always successful – individuals have different problems and needs, and some of them just don't benefit from what we do." Many of the individuals who have benefited have gone on to live independent lives, to study and find jobs. On average, there will be 15 service users working at People & Gardens every day, and each one comes for anything between a single day and a

full working week, depending on their level of need, what they want to achieve and the level of sponsorship or payment they receive. Their ages range from 20-70. Not only are there mental and physical conditions, but also those with challenging behaviour. Conditions range from cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mild dementia, autism and Aspergers Syndrome to depression and even Fragile X Syndrome. Members of staff are trained in handling these conditions, but they also receive nurse visits and other support for any major health issues.

Everyone mucks in and participates in all aspects of the day-to-day work at the project. "It's important that they get involved with everything," Ken says. "It builds up their confidence and range of skills. Our motto is: 'It's not about waiting for the storm to pass, but learning to dance in the rain.' And the benefits are for us, the staff, as well as the users – there are few people who go to bed every night looking forward to getting up for work in the morning – but I'm one of them! It's the best job in the world – being able to work with plants and

people – assisting them to improve their own lives."

The project has a whole host of successes to boast about, including now providing part-time paid employment for three ex-service users, who have been with the project since it started. "About 80 percent of people will suffer some sort of mental health issues during their life," Ken says. "Gardening is a brilliant way to help get over this, especially growing and providing veg."

USEFUL CONTACT

If you would like to know more about People & Gardens or the Quality of Life Veg Bag Scheme, write to Ken Radford at the following address:

WATERING LANE NURSERY, PENTEWAN, ST. AUSTELL, CORNWALL PL26 6BE.

Alternatively, call 01726 222 919 or visit peopleandgardens.co.uk. He is more than happy to give help and advice to anyone interested in setting up a similar enterprise or to arrange a visit to see his in action.