

Rebuilding: Bega and better!

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There was one group of students at Bega High School looking forward to returning to school after the holidays – to see how their special project is bearing fruit, or vegetables.

The boys that make up part of the Support Unit at Bega High took on an overgrown plot in the school grounds for a produce garden in the middle of last year and their green thumbs grew so confidently that they became part of the Bega council's bushfire relief project to supply affected property owners with native seedlings.

Special education teacher Natasha Quast said the school vegie patch had started out as a project for the class to clear out and weed an overgrown plot of school land, that is now planted with tomatoes, strawberries, shallots, carrots, spinach, lettuce, parsley, sunflowers and natives.



“With the idea of planting a garden, I wanted to build their skills, and not just the hands-on digging and making [skills] but also teamwork, trouble-shooting and problem-solving and how to do this without a lot of money,” Ms Quast said.

To that end, the boys upcycled some materials stored around the grounds to the point of turning a disused bin holder into a planter that holds a wooden-slat pot.

“One of the really big things I wanted them to learn was how to finish a project,” Ms Quast said. “So often you can get started and not finish and that’s why I put together the little PowerPoint presentation which I then gave to them as a bound book for Christmas.

“It’s a really lovely space and they’re really proud of it ... and have gone out to other areas of the school and weeded and put some other plants in.”

When the Bega Valley Shire Council and charity Convoy of Hope began a program with schools to grow seedlings for the revegetation of bushfire-ravaged properties, the MC1 boys at Bega High took on the project in their new-found garden space.

Council's Environmental Education Officer, Natalie Ryan said the project is an avenue for students to be a part of the recovery process and support their local community and wildlife.

"We took 150 of those little plants, nurtured them and re-potted them and just this week [before school holidays] they've gone out to the bushfire-affected communities," Ms Quast said. Many were taken by staff whose property had been burnt with the rest offered for free outside the school.

"We took that on because we had the garden space and I really wanted the boys to think about being community-focussed as well, and teach them to think outside their needs, especially with the trauma we've gone through in this area.

"To help the community out and be a bit more globally and community minded because that makes a better person too."

She said the benefits flowed into the classroom. "It helped with their social skills, teaching them to work together well, to have a plan and follow instructions," Ms Quast said.

"We sat down and worked out what we needed and what sort of flow of work are we going to do in the garden. The classroom doesn't have to be in four walls, does it?"

"When they need to come out of the classroom I've got something for them to do. Now we've got to the point where they can pick a carrot out of the garden or there's little tomatoes, so they've learnt the skills of growing fresh vegetables as well."