

The garden that feeds a thousand

Ellen Leping is the epitome of dedication. As the principal of Mokaila Primary School in Letlhogoring, near Mahikeng, North West, she is responsible for shaping the futures of 285 learners on their journey towards high school. As a community activist, she is instrumental in providing over 1 000 local people in this remote village with an easily accessible supply of fresh produce from the school's food garden.

"We're a long way from town, and I was determined to make life easier for people by finding a way for them to buy their food closer to home," explains Leping. "There had been a garden here before, but its soil was poor and badly managed, and it became neglected. To make matters worse, our area suffered a crippling drought, which destroyed any surviving plants and crushed the hopes of our gardeners."

Undaunted, Leping started again from scratch. Using manure from the village kraal and seeds she bought with money from her own pocket, she slowly began to bring it back to life. Leping and a team of six passionate and dedicated volunteers cultivate the crops every morning before school and every afternoon after classes.

The project had been self-funded from inception, but last year Checkers came on board. The retailer's support includes a series of training workshops in permaculture techniques, which have helped to strengthen the team's understanding of the importance of crop rotation, composting, soil health and pest control using aloe mixtures – among other areas.

The learners now work in the garden as part of their life skills programme and Leping has since created a learning garden to reinforce their knowledge. Using the revenue generated from its fresh produce sales, the school is able to provide learners with a nutritious daily meal and pay the volunteers a small stipend.

Checkers also expanded the garden by providing thousands of new seedlings as well as herbs and fruit trees. The garden now produces a rich variety of crops including beetroot, carrots, spinach, lettuce, green peppers, chillies and cabbage.

The result is that the team at Mokaila Primary School have managed to double its harvest in just one year.

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