

## ***An Interview with David Hawkins***

**from the Arts and Healing Network  
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“My hope was to make the garden a transformative environment where children would be changed simply by being in this space they had helped create. It became a collective work of art.” -David Hawkins about the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, CA

*David Hawkins has worked as a counselor, teacher and advocate for young people in schools, colleges, adventure playgrounds, arts centers, their homes, and the street. For ten years he worked in Inner London with boys who had been suspended from school for violent or racist behavior. He was the founding Project Manager of [The Edible Schoolyard](#) at Martin Luther King Middle School, a multi-racial school in Berkeley, California. David is currently the co-founder of Wild Zones. Mary Daniel Hobson interviewed him in March 2007 about his inspiring work with youth gardens at the Edible Schoolyard.*



*Mary Daniel Hobson:* When did you first become a gardener? How has gardening impacted you -- has it been transformational for you?

*David Hawkins:* I don't really think of myself as a gardener. I think of myself as someone whose passion in life is to work in innovative ways with children and youth. Having said that, working in gardens has been important in changing the way I experience the world.

The first time was while living in France when I created a vegetable garden in a corner of a field adjacent to a primitive farmhouse I lived in. I loved the warmth of southern France compared to England and the fact that I could grow so many more interesting crops: tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, melons, sweet corn. I had to winch the water to irrigate the garden in buckets from a stone well and carry them twenty yards. But I loved the sheer physicality of the labor and the sensuality of moistening the warm soil so the plants could flourish. Gardening and food were also part of everyday culture and conversation, and by sharing in this I felt more a part of the community. I actually felt more at home in France than I ever had growing up in England.

The next time gardening really influenced me was when I worked at the garden at what is now known as the [Occidental Arts & Ecology Center](#) in Sonoma County. I went there with a rather utilitarian desire to learn to grow food to feed the world. I was frustrated by the way so many flowers, herbs and heirloom varieties were being grown. I was more concerned with how many calories we were producing. I did enjoy the garden, and I learned a tremendous amount from Doug Gosling who was, and still is, the head gardener there. But it was only after I left that I realized how much I missed the beauty and richness of that garden, and what an indelible mark it had made on my life and sensibilities. Doug asked me to return from time to time to lead tours of the garden and I saw how the effect of all that beauty and variety was really transformative for so many people.

*Mary Daniel:* You were involved for several years in the [Edible Schoolyard](#) in Berkeley, CA. What is the Edible Schoolyard? How did it get started? What is its vision? What was your role there?

*David:* I was the founding Project Manager and Garden Manager. The Edible Schoolyard was the idea of Alice Waters of Chez Panisse and as a result it received a lot of press and television coverage. The vision was to improve the children's nutrition and understanding of ecology by creating a garden, a teaching kitchen, and gradually develop a school lunch program serving fresh locally-grown produce. The story, as told many times in the media, tends to focus on Alice as a celebrity with a rare and very laudable commitment to public education, nutrition and sustainability. But, how the garden was actually built by the 11-13 year olds, with the help of their teachers and community volunteers is a story that remains largely untold.



Although I came to love gardening as an adult, I hadn't enjoyed gardening as a child or as a teenager, when doing garden work was a chore and a source of conflict with my parents. When I told an African American neighbor about getting the job at the Edible Schoolyard he told me his great grandmother had been a slave and it concerned him that children were being expected to do compulsory garden work as part of their school day. A teacher at the school told me she was worried that many Latino parents would also be uncomfortable with their children doing

the dirty, low status work that gardening involves—just the things they hoped their children would avoid by going to school.

The weedy, trash-littered asphalt acre was a daunting prospect and some students expressed amazement that they were expected to build a garden during their school day without pay. But I think many of them were also intrigued that we had so much faith in their potential. Most school gardens are created by skilled adults and sometimes by landscape architects. I knew that the garden experience had to be fun and playful if it was to capture the hearts of a majority of the kids. I also have tremendous faith in the value of free-play. Free-play develops our capacity to feel at home in our own bodies and the world about us. It enlivens children's connection with the world, and with each other. It is important for their social development, in fostering their ability to negotiate, to converse, to empathize, to imagine, to organize and to understand. Play is also important in familiarizing young people with the nature of the material world we inhabit and the tools we use to deal with it.



When we began creating the garden we had a huge mound of municipal compost delivered – about 24 tons of it. I showed the team who opted for wheelbarrowing the compost to the beds how best to shovel it from the edge allowing the compost to tumble loosely down onto the shovel. When I

returned fifteen minutes later to see how they were getting on they had their wheelbarrows in a joyful throng around the crater of a smoldering volcano. The mound was being trampled and compacted in just the way I'd warned them to avoid. Their joy in delving and tunneling in the warm compost disarmed me. I knew it had to be playful; it had to be fun if the project was going to work.

I also knew that the relationship between the kids and the adults working in the garden had to be respectful, and tolerant of different reactions to the experience. What was a rich and exciting encounter with nature for some students was a potentially humiliating experience of dirty work in a bug-infested environment for others. Mediating such differences without judgment was a challenge worth meeting. I wanted the garden to be a place where all children felt valued and respected. For some children who were not succeeding in the classroom it was an opportunity to demonstrate their competence in a

wide range of practical and social situations and be seen as a success rather than a failure.

*Mary Daniel:* How was the garden designed and built?

*David:* The garden wasn't ever designed on paper we just started to make it, and it has a very different feeling for that reason. Paths wind along following curved beds. Irregular shaped little fields have vegetables, herbs, flowers and useful weeds growing in them, and are bounded by fences made of tree branches.

Students built almost everything in the garden, laying irrigation pipes, drainage and building terraces with retaining walls of recycled concrete. The involvement of the students affected the materials we used and the methods of construction. I wanted a garden where kids could be successful and give their own distinctive touch to the place. So instead of using lumber which would have required precision and tools that were not appropriate to 11 and 12 year olds, we use branches from the trees around the garden to make trellises and our central meeting place, a shade structure we called the Ramada.

I wanted the garden to come about in an unsystematic way and to have an obscure history that could be forgotten or mythologized, but never reduced to a mathematical formula or a utilitarian or aesthetic program. My hope was to make the garden a transformative environment where children would be changed simply by being in this space they had helped create. It became a collective work of art.



Some of the things would not have been done in most gardens where people are growing food or where adults are creating something beautiful. The students made a huge birds' nest out of branches and twigs that was big enough for four people to sit in. My favorite part of the garden was the Middle River, which the students began to dig quite spontaneously to drain a waterlogged part of the garden where they wanted to plant apple trees

during our first relentlessly soggy El Nino winter. I'd never seen such a splendid playful application of youthful energy by so many young people over such a long time. The combination of water, mud, and high spirits, of dams, floods, jokes and earnest hard work, was something children today don't experience very often.

The students also reclaimed a particularly overgrown part of the site, cutting back and uprooting the invasive cotoneaster, terracing and replanting the bank with hazelnuts they had grown from cuttings. The huge acacia tree that was crowding the California live oaks was gradually harvested and provided the material for building the Ramada, the circular shade structure that students and community volunteers built as their meeting place for the beginning and end of the garden class. They figured out how to demolish the heavy steel railings that marked the upper edge of the bank. They planted, made pathways, bridges, walls and dug a deep clay mine. Students were trusted to use axes, pickaxes, sledgehammers and crowbars to go about their jobs, and never once did a serious accident occur in all the thousands of child hours they worked in the garden.

*Mary Daniel:* What is special and significant about the experience of the Edible Schoolyard?

*David:* The Edible Schoolyard fostered a very special sort of collective activity. It is rare in our culture for young people to be given the chance to create something tangible, to care for the earth, to choose the task they would like to do, and to learn to work together in a team. There were, of course, students who were not very interested, who hung out and watched or who had conversations, some who hindered or just got in the way. But the learning was incredible. It was not the kind of learning you could test anyone on. Sometimes it was a chance to learn what you could do, what resources and intelligence you could muster, whether your friends would be supportive, whether you could work with someone you didn't like: to learn what kinds of interaction were constructive, and how things could fall apart. It was also a chance to find out about some of the elements we depend on to live on this planet – dirt, rocks, water, and plants.



*Mary Daniel:* Can you share an inspirational story from your time at the Edible Schoolyard?

*David:* Gardens are wonderful places for adults to be together with children and young people. Unlike the classroom situation, control cannot be strictly maintained, and it's much less clear what will be of significance to a student. Juan was on our first summer project. He would never do anything willingly. Only with the greatest reluctance could he be induced to push a wheelbarrow across the garden. In the end, I gave up and stopped asking him to do anything. He hung around with the other kids watching them do stuff, make beds and plant seeds. At the end of six weeks I thought if there was one kid who'd failed to get anything out of the program it was Juan.

I was surprised when his mother came during the last week to thank me for having him on the project. "Thank you so much! Juan has been transformed by working in the garden," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "Juan used to come home and play with video games and watch TV all evening. Now he comes home and talks and talks about the garden and everything that is happening there. He talks to the family and our friends and neighbors and now he has started making up stories about gardens and plants."

Having faith in young people and in trusting their ability to have a creative relationship to their world is central to my way of working with young people. It's not easy to do this because that's not the way adults traditionally relate to children. I remember giving two girls a wheelbarrow in a box and asking them to assemble it. At the end of the year they told me it had been a highlight for them. No one had ever trusted them to do anything like that before without hovering over them and giving them advice. So faith can express itself in small, seemingly insignificant ways. In Juan's case it was harder because I had no evidence that the garden had had any effect on him whatsoever.

At the end of the garden class we always had a closing circle in the Ramada and I thanked the students for the work they had done. One day a boy said, "Mr. Hawkins you thanked us all for working well, but I didn't do much."

"That's true," I replied, "but you know, any week in the garden you can make a fresh start. There might be a lot of reasons why you might not feel much like working on any one day. Next time you come you might feel like working really hard".

For several seconds he sat there taking it in, and then he sprang up and came across the circle towards me, smiling to shake my hand. He was not someone I would have expected to act in such a

demonstrative and spontaneous way in front of his classmates. Over the next two years he began to really enjoy the garden. I learned that his mother was in prison for drug dealing and he traveled each day from a distant part of Oakland to go to school outside his drug-infested neighborhood.

*Mary Daniel:* What advice do you have for someone who would like to start a community garden project, especially one involving children?

*David:* Setting the tone when the children and teenagers come to the garden is probably the most important factor in making the garden work. It's important to welcome the young people, to look pleased to see them, to smile at them rather than express anxiety, and to expect the best of them. It's possible to look at people in a way that expresses faith in them! Respect for young people and faith in them are indispensable. It's also important to recognize the value of both their work and their play and thank them for it. Somebody asked me one day what I thought were the most important things the students learned from being in the garden and I said dealing with uncertainty. At one time I felt really bad about the chaotic period at the beginning of the class when the students are looking for their jobs and tools and trying to figure out what to do. Then I came to see it more as a virtue and an opportunity.

*Mary Daniel:* Please share some of your favorite books, links, etc on this topic.

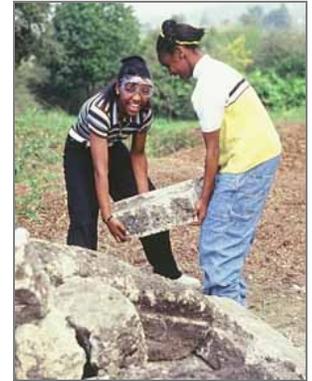
*David:* As resources for thinking about sharing the complexity and richness of nature in a garden with children and youth I like a book about insects and bugs called [\*Life on A Little Known Planet\*](#) by Howard Ensign Evans. My favorite book about soil is [\*Dirt - The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth\*](#) by William Bryant Logan.

There's a song called *So Many People (with so much to give)* This song inspires me when thinking about how much children have to give - and how little opportunity we give them to show that. It's by [\*Youssou N'Dour\*](#) on his album *Nothing's In Vain*. It's actually about the people of Africa, but it works in relation to children.

So much writing about children is essentially about controlling them rather than building relationship, but I like [\*Alfie Kohn's books\*](#), and William Stafford's essays on teaching. I think it's a great pity that the work of the great French educator, Celestin Freinet is not better known in the English-speaking world. I'm also an enthusiast for Italy's Child Friendly City initiative and the early childhood education program in Reggio Emilia.

*Mary Daniel:* What are you doing now?

*David:* Currently I'm working with my wife Karen Payne on a project we've developed together called Wild Zones. Wild Zones are ecologically rich environments that offer open-ended possibilities for self-designed play, creativity, socializing and solitude. They differ from parks and nature reserves in that they afford the opportunity to do practical and adventurous things, such as building shelters, making trails, climbing trees, damming creeks, creating sculptures from natural objects and other types of exploration and free play. A Wild Zone is also a new form of social space for adults, children and teenagers - a place where trust between the generations can be created through working and playing together. They are places for people of all ages to form bonds of caring and connection with the beauty and possibilities of the natural world. You'll soon be able to find out more from our website at [www.wild-zone.net](http://www.wild-zone.net).



*Mary Daniel:* Is there anything else you would like to share?

*David:* Children and youth have so much to give, and yet we give them very few opportunities for showing what they can do on their own terms. There is a question I return to again and again when seeking a hopeful way forward in my work with young people. "How do we raise a generation of young people who love the earth and love their own lives?" A quote from the great civil rights activist Howard Thurman has always given me inspiration in thinking about this. He said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive." So I've always tried to contact the part of children that has the potential of coming alive and growing. Often the young people are not aware of this potential in themselves and they need adults to hold a mirror to reflect it.

*For more information about the Edible Schoolyard, please visit [www.edibleschoolyard.org](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org). You can contact David Hawkins at [dhawkins@wild-zone.net](mailto:dhawkins@wild-zone.net).*