CASE STUDY

In the food forest...

A space for learning about sustainable food choices and a love of Boodja (Country)

SERVICE	Nature's Atelier
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	Mixed model – morning and afternoon tea provided on-site, lunch provided from home
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, for-profit
AGE RANGE	6 months to 5 years (up to 12 years with the OSHC service)
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	100
NUMBER OF STAFF	45
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Inner regional

LOCATION

Vasse, WA



Background

Nature's Atelier is located in Vasse in WA's Southwest region. It is a long day care centre with a philosophy based on Nature Play, the Reggio Emilia and Pickler approaches, which provides a rich learning environment for the children who attend.

As the centre is located on 16 hectares of land, there is ample space for growing fruits and vegetables at the service. This has led to the creation of the centre's Food Forest, and harvests are plentiful enough to supply some of the fresh produce to feed the children. They hope that in the future they will be able to expand the Food Forest and be able to provide all produce on-site for the centre.

What did you want to do?

To empower children to be sustainability leaders:

- They wanted to be able to connect them to the environment through practices embedded into the daily flow of the service.
- To show children the lifecycles of plants and animals.
- To teach children about where food comes from, seasonality, when food is ripe and about the abundance and variety of foods available.
- To give children a natural sensory experience.
- To build an understanding in children of respect for plants and nature.

What did you do?

- Nature play and connection to Boodja (Country) have always been a big part of the philosophy at Nature's Atelier.
- This includes the native landscape, and intentional food gardens.
- They started small with a small patch of garden.
- In 2019 they established a bigger garden with raised beds.
- In 2021, for their annual community celebration, they planted the first seeds of the Food Forest, along with the childcare community. This has been part of the rehabilitation of the whole area.

How did you go about starting the Food Forest?

- They consulted a permaculturalist who provided:
  - A guide on what and when to plant, according to the Noongar seasons.
  - A plan to gradually rehabilitate the soil using continual cover crops.
- Children chose what to plant according to this guide.
- Children were also involved in starting seedlings from seeds.
- They have now employed a full-time gardener who looks after the Food Forest and gardens. The gardener also spends part of the week mentoring the children on looking after the food forest and 'children's garden', where children can plant and tend their own vegetables and herbs.
- The centre chefs liaise with the gardener to help decide what to plant, or adapt recipes according to what is in season.

The difference it has made

The Food Forest has provided a rich learning environment for a myriad of experiences:

- Sensory.
- Physical play.
- Growing food.
- Harvesting food.
- Respecting nature.
- Learning about lifecycles and how everything is connected.
- This includes the lifecycle of their food scraps when making compost.
- By composting both the paper towels and food scraps we are also able to greatly reduce the centre's landfill contribution.
- Learning about the abundance and variety of foods available.
- Children are able to identify a range of fruits and vegetables.
- Children learn respect for living things.
- Children develop a growing understanding of their connection to the world around them, with caring for Boodja at the heart of activities.
- The connection with living things is very calming and regulating for the children, and the Food Forest gives them space to experience this.
- The Food Forest also gives children opportunities to show they are competent and capable.

Top tips

- Before you start a garden at your service, have a deep understanding of:
  - Why you are adding this space into your service.
  - What impacts it will have on child development.
  - What impact it will have on helping them to become responsible members of the community.
- Consult with experienced people who can help you make it a success.
- Have lots of staff and parent involvement to establish and maintain the addition to your centre.
- Address common "barriers" with creative solutions. For example, we found that children were disrupting the growth of plants by digging around them. Solution: We addressed the issue by providing an intentional "digging" patch so the children could explore digging without hurting the new plants.
- "Have passionate people to push it forward and keep it on track".
  - Having a staff member or a family member at the centre who can be a mentor in the space will make it much more successful.
- A Food Forest needs maintenance – make sure you are set up well to care for it over a long period of time.
- Building your own Food Forest and gardens doesn't have to cost a lot. To save some money you can:
  - Plant directly into the ground.
  - Build garden beds from recycled materials.
  - Source cheap/free materials from families, second-hand stores, online community marketplaces and/or "tip shops".
  - Create your own compost to fertilise the soil.
  - Grow from seed rather than seedlings.
  - This also provides a richer learning experience for the children as they are able to see the whole lifecycle of the plants.
- Harvest seeds to save for the next season.
- Vegetables grow faster than fruit trees, so this is a good place to start.
- Grants can help with costs.
- Embed the Food Forest, its maintenance, activities, etc into your programs to ensure it has real meaning for the staff and children.
- It doesn't have to be complicated – start with things that staff are comfortable with and are achievable, and build up over time.

What Nature's Atelier mainly hopes to achieve with the Food Forest, as well as other initiatives in the centre, is to:

- **Reduce harm to the environment while actively working to improve it.**
- **Provide rich learning experiences for children.**
- **Help children understand what it takes to grow food and think about their own patterns of consumption.**
- **Help children learn about connection to and respect for the land.**

These are all things the staff model for children through the experiences provided at Nature's Atelier. They hope that the centre can provide children with skills and knowledge that they can take through their lives and become the environmental stewards our planet needs.