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# The Garden That Grew Us

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Frances Cheung

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**W**hen I first began my practicum in the Arbutus Room, the infant program of the Our Children's Centre Society in Victoria, I noticed a small fenced-off garden in our outdoor yard. The fence had been put up to prevent the children between the ages of 12 and 18 months from climbing in, a playful curiosity that had once turned into a challenge.

The other educators mentioned that the garden soil was “cursed” and unlikely to grow anything, so the space had become more of a boundary than a place of exploration. At that time, I accepted it as part of the environment and didn't think much more of it.

This year, that changed. Emily, one of the educators in the Arbutus Room, suggested that we try to bring life back into our little garden by planting fruits and vegetables. Her idea sparked excitement and curiosity among the team. Together, we ordered seedlings from a school fundraiser and decided to transform the forgotten space into a living, growing part of our yard. Emily brought in new soil and compost, and one sunny morning, we removed the fence and invited the children to join us in planning.

At first, I had my doubts. I imagined the children pulling up plants, stepping in the soil, and creating chaos. But what unfolded was the complete opposite. From the moment we began, the children showed such gentleness and care. We talked each day about being gentle with the



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garden, about watering and watching the plants grow.

These daily rituals became moments of connection between educators, children, and the natural world. During summer, the children loved using the leftover water from water play to water the plants. Their joy and engagement grew alongside the strawberries, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchinis, and red peppers.

The garden began as a living symbol of our room ethos—slowing down, being present, and being inclusive.

Slowing down was embodied in every stage of this project. Garden-

ing required patience, waiting for sprouts to emerge, noticing subtle changes, and observing the slow rhythms of growth. It invited both educators and children to move at nature's pace, to appreciate the process rather than rushing toward a product. Through this, we rediscovered the beauty of quiet moments and the value of unhurried learning.

Being present came naturally in the garden. Each day, as we tended to the plants, the children engaged with their senses, touching soil, smelling leaves, feeling the cool water, and observing colours change. These sensory experiences grounded us

in the “here and now.” The garden offered opportunities to notice the small details—a new leaf, a ripening fruit, a change in texture—and to celebrate them together.

Being inclusive unfolded through the shared ownership of the garden. Every child, regardless of age or ability, had a role to play, carrying a small watering can, touching the soil, or observing closely. The garden belonged to everyone. It became a space where the children’s contributions were valued and visible, and where collaboration naturally grew alongside the plants. Families also became part of

the story, from providing seedlings to parents hearing about what the children had planted and tasted.

Although not every plant thrived (our zucchini never quite made it due to limited sunlight), the learning that blossomed was far richer than any harvest. The children learned respect for living things, experienced responsibility, and developed a deep connection to nature. What began as a simple experiment became a shared journey of growth for the children, the educators, and the garden itself.

Our once “cursed” patch of soil now stands as a reminder that with care,

curiosity, and community, even the most unlikely spaces can flourish.

*Frances Cheung completed her infant-toddler practicum at Our Children’s Centre Society, a non-profit child care centre in Victoria. Inspired by her passion for supporting young children during their earliest stages of development, she joined the Arbutus Program full-time in 2023, where she now works closely with infants and their families. Frances is also a dedicated mentor to students, sharing her knowledge and fostering the next generation of early childhood educators with care and enthusiasm.*



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