



**PRIZE PROJECT:** Eugene with principal Carmel, left, and designer Elma Fenton

Fresh air, flowers and no blackboard – it's like no class you've ever seen

By Eugene Higgins

It's a classroom surrounded by greenery and open to the elements – but the similarities with the hedge schools of old end there. This is a manicured splash of colour in the grounds of a south Dublin primary school and it certainly beats a stuffy, chalky classroom hands down – weather-permitting, of course.

When I visited Presentation Primary School in Terenure, it was a typically cold, windy Irish day, but that didn't seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the students or of the principal, Carmel Hume, who is the driving force behind the project.

While sitting under the trees in the outdoor classroom, Carmel explained how the idea developed into an outdoor classroom/serenity garden that was also a playground.

She said: 'The school was surrounded by too much concrete and buildings, and there was an area within the school grounds that was overgrown and which had gone wild with weeds and poorly maintained grass.'

'This seemed an ideal location and was suitably surrounded by sycamore trees, one of which had to be sacrificed as it was leaning dangerously.'

It was designed by Elma Fenton, who has won a silver medal at the Chelsea Flower Show. Carmel has organised various fundraisers over the past few years to pay for it all. It was completed last September.

'I guess all the subscribers who supported the cause must be delighted, as I certainly feel this design will be looked at and adapted by other schools,' Carmel said.

There was one detail that worried me, however. Elma told me: 'Due to heavy shading and excessive wear, a decision was taken to use artificial grass.'

The whole idea of plastic grass is, in my book, appalling. But Carmel insists it was the right decision.

'Real grass would be a disaster after the rain and leaves are finished with it,' she explained.

Taking into account how great it all looked, I decided I'd have to think of it as a carpet and get past it. It is designed with low seating done in very effective C shapes. It's a handy spot for parents to gather at the end of the day as they wait for their children.

The colourful raised beds, full of bright pansies and violas, are gorgeous. The children have easy access to plant from season to season and this is overseen by a green committee that includes pupils.

Decking made of a wood/plastic combination was used as a central stage area. In my experience, decking tends to look awful but this is a rare exception.

One of the aspects that really impressed me was the use of hoggin. It is an excellent, old-style pathway surface, a mixture of sand, gravel and binding clay and becomes a hard surface when it is laid correctly. It is far more porous than the awful tarmac. Though much used in Britain and continental Europe, it is sadly under-used in Ireland.

# A hedge school for 21st century



**SCHOOL'S OUT:** A sketch of the garden classroom at Presentation Primary School, Terenure, and, inset, pupils gather on the benches

## So much more than chocolate



**SWEET:** A bunny by Cluizel

Easter Sunday is just a week away so it's time to shake off the abstinence and indulge in some novelties.

Anvil Home in Bray, Co. Wicklow, is continuing its long-running tradition of housing day-old baby chicks in the store during Easter week.

Shoppers can admire these fluffy creatures from Monday, April 6, until Saturday, April 11, as they peruse Anvil's seasonal fare.

That Anvil fare includes bunny egg-holders for the kids (€4.75), chicks to decorate your Easter cake (€6 for a box of 12), and an egg-decorated Easter wreath (€26). The colourful Easter trees (€12.50) are proving popular, as are wooden hanging ornaments (€11.50).

Marks & Spencer has a whole Chicken Collection crockery range that will liven up any table. There are cookie jars, toast racks, aprons, mugs and jugs. Prices from €5.50.

Easter novelties from Debenhams include an oven glove and aprons, an egg timer, egg cups and spoons, pictured inset, and more – all for around €11.

But chocolate is the essential Easter treat. If you want more than Cadbury, check out the mouth-watering Michel Cluizel chocolates at Terroirs in Donnybrook, Dublin 4. Juju Le Lapin is €7.50, but you could decorate with the smaller ones for €4.50 each – [www.terroirs.ie](http://www.terroirs.ie).

**Muriel Bolger**

Apart from the lack of four walls and a roof, what sets it apart from a regular classroom is the absence of a blackboard. They concluded that it would not be an ideal item to leave unattended, so instead, they opted for a mural painted by Deirdre Walsh, one of the teachers. It makes it all look a lot less formal.

The big problem, inevitably, is the weather. Heavy rain and snow over the winter months have kept the classroom out of action for long periods. However, the teachers are determined to use it as much as possible, so it should come into its own now as the weather warms up.

It has been used in particular for

class reading sessions and to teach the children about the plants and about gardening.

The school incorporates a pre-school for children aged two to four, who make regular use of the class.

So what did the girls of the school think? Maeve said: 'When you are gloomy, you just sit down on the

benches and you feel happy again.'

Mollie told me: 'I like the way the flowers are different colours and I see my Mummy and Daddy in them.'

Lauren summed it up for me when she said: 'The flowers have wonderful colours and they make me feel happy when I look at them.'

Second-class pupil Isobel said: 'When you are sad, you can sing quietly to yourself there.'

Every single comment was so positive that I suspect this project is creating a new generation of modern-thinking gardeners. An Taisce has just given the school its first green flag.

While touring the rest of the school, the staff told me they have started growing potatoes, strawberries and have also a native planting scheme that includes hazel, beech and sorbus. They also have a very impressive lemon tree planted on one of their sunny corridors. So it seems a safe bet that there will be more An Taisce flags on the way.

Carmel and her staff deserve an A+ for this. Never before have I left a school feeling elated.

● *Landscape architect and horticulturalist Elma Fenton's website is [www.ellenlandscapedesigns.com](http://www.ellenlandscapedesigns.com).*

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