We made origami envelopes a few weeks ago and we’re putting seeds in them for Mother’s Day. You put different seeds in each envelope and then you tie it with string. First you write the names of the seeds then you can grow them at home. You have to get all the seeds out of the pods. The big seeds are sort of striped like a zebra; we call them dragon tongues.

(Aluka, age 11)

I am standing in an overcrowded potting shed full of wheelbarrows, gloves, trowels, shovels and empty garden pots stacked high. Coiled green hoses and digging forks hang on one side of the shed, and on the back wall a large blackboard covered in notes in coloured chalk. ‘Things to do in the garden today’ heads an extensive list of ‘weeding’, ‘watering’, ‘empty and spread the worm wee’, ‘turn the compost’, ‘collect parsley seed’, ‘plant peas’, ‘seed-saving’ and ‘hang CDs on fig tree’. The gardening teacher Jennie, who is responsible for the several weekly gardening classes, has generated the list and uses it as a way of informing children about what needs attention in the garden at the start of the lesson. Several wooden shelves line the remaining side of the shed where half a dozen portable wooden trays with over 30 different-sized glass jars sit. Inside the jars are an assortment of seeds that have been collected by the children over previous months of garden lessons – seeds of brown, green and grey, of different shapes and sizes. It’s a lovely sight and I recognise many of the seeds familiar to me from time spent collecting and sowing seed in my own garden – tiny thin lettuce and carrot seeds, the slightly bigger but still small knobbly beetroot seeds, flat and crinkled dried broad beans, small grey-green bush beans, pointy blackish-grey striped sunflower seeds and round shrivelled peas. Beyond
these basic varieties I struggle to recognise (to my disappointment) the remaining varieties that are less familiar to me.

Aluka is a senior student at Kallista public primary school with a population of 155 children, in an outer suburb in the foothills south east of Melbourne. In the school’s gardening programme, children from grades 3 to 6 participate in weekly garden and kitchen lessons (50 minutes and 60 minutes respectively) under the guidance of the gardening teacher Jennie, the kitchen teacher Rosalie, the accompanying classroom teacher and an assortment of community volunteers who work with children in small groups in the garden and kitchen settings. The programme has been developed in affiliation with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program (SAKGP) that uses a kitchen garden framework to advance food literacy for children from grades 3 to 6. Alexander, a well-known food writer, chef and food activist originally commenced cooking lessons as a volunteer in one of Melbourne’s poorer inner-city schools in early 2000s where she introduced children to different foods through a cooking programme in one of the kitchen classrooms. As the kitchen lessons developed and became more popular, a garden was created in the school grounds to source food for the kitchen lessons.

This particular kitchen garden model has been further developed, and now a decade later hundreds of Australian schools have taken up the ‘growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing food’ philosophy that currently underpins the SAKGP framework. The programme was inspired by the widely known work of American food philosopher and chef Alice Waters who for the past two decades has championed the broader idea that food, including its consumption and production, and most importantly children’s relationship to it, matters at every level: for health, nutrition and personal pleasure, but also for its relevance to the health of the entire society. Her emphasis on teaching children about the more aesthetic and affective elements of learning that include ‘care, beauty, concentration, discernment and sensuality’ (Waters, 2005, p. 52) through hands-on participation has been an important contribution to the kitchen garden movement.

Meanwhile, Aluka has taken me into the potting shed to show me the different types of seeds she and her peers have been collecting in their gardening classes. Earlier she had told me about the importance of saving seed from the school’s vegetable garden – ‘it lets you recycle and replant the seed and you don’t have to buy plants’ – explaining how seed saving was a regular and popular feature of the gardening programme. She had also declared how much she loved collecting the seeds