

## How Does Your Garden Grow? Environmental Justice Aspects of Community Gardens



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### ABSTRACT

*Community gardens are models for improving health by growing and eating local produce. In addition, they are instruments for generating social awareness and community change. This conceptual paper focuses on the benefits of community gardens as the authors understood them, informed by participant observation and literature coming out of the environmental justice movement.*

### INTRODUCTION

The authors of this crib note live in a rural community in west-central Illinois. Surrounded by a sea of inedible corn and soybean fields, we have small, shady backyards not well-suited to gardening. Although there are several successful CSA (community supported agriculture) farms in the area that grow non-commodity crops, the community supported agriculture model is often out of reach for middle-to low-income households. It can be challenging to find garden space accessible to all members of the community—including seniors, those with disabilities, and those with low incomes. A local grassroots movement began as an act of environmental justice, but has grown into a community development initiative that brings diverse people together in an environmentally positive space.

According to Wendell Berry, “Gardening has a power that is political and even democratic” (1981:186). Community gardens are often sites of political activism, where people stake claims to spaces that traditionally have been enclosed and viewed as private, owned by individuals, corporations, or governments. The establishment of community gardens returns the land to the commons. Once returned, the commons often becomes much more than a place to grow food. In our case, the garden became a place of community for us: a place to share knowledge, resources, and friendship, while pursuing shared goals. Scholars like Ferris et al. (2001:559) argue that “the use of urban open spaces for parks and gardens is closely associated with environmental justice and equity.” These spaces can be locales where what Vandana Shiva (2005) calls

“food democracy” takes place. Building on Shiva’s model in the context of environmental justice, we contend that the community built by gardening together is another important part piece of the “food democracy” puzzle.

Historically in the United States, environmental justice has focused on proximity to negative land use like factories and landfills (e.g., Bullard 1990; Hird 1993). Subsequent works examine environmental justice in the context of green space access to urban land. Gottlieb (2005) explains the environmental justice movement as one that seeks to move beyond preservation of open space and re-conceptualize urban space for parks and recreational activities such as community gardening and farmers’ markets for low-income populations. White’s (2011) study of urban gardens as a place of resistance uses an eco-feminist framework to examine class and race based activism to acquire open space access in context of food security in urban Detroit. As Salazar (1998) and Porter (2009) note, these environmental justice movements represent the procurement of environmental “goods.”

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM A CASE STUDY

The overwhelming majority of previous research that has been conducted (Baker 2004; Ferris et al. 2001; Schmeltzkopf 1995) has focused on urban community gardens. In our research, we characterize the community gardens movement in a rural context, not an urban one. Although the community is overwhelmingly white (89 percent) (US Census Bureau 2010), our participants are drawn from the economic and social diversity found within our community. Gardeners include low-income residents, people with disabilities, factory workers, professors, etc. The representation of low-income people and those with disabilities is higher than that of the county based on location of the gardens on housing sites for these populations.

Outside of Western Illinois University, which employs over 1,800 people, the other main economic

activity in McDonough County is farming. The soils in this region are among the most fertile in the United States. Farms in the area reflect the national trend in industrial agriculture with a decreasing number of farms, while the size of farms increases (McIlvaine-Newsad et al. 2004). The crops produced in the area are generally not food crops, but are commodities like corn and soybeans.

The irony of our situation is that we live in the breadbasket of the United States and yet, many of us are food-insecure because of the high cost of providing healthy foods for our families. In a context of environmental justice, McDonough County has the highest percentage of poverty among contiguous counties. Nearly 21 percent of residents of McDonough County are below the federal poverty line as compared to 12.2 percent of United States residents (County Health Rankings 2010; US Census Bureau 2008). Economically, the region has suffered since the 1990s when manufacturing plants began to relocate their businesses overseas. Five factories that once contributed to the area’s employment are no longer in existence. Many of our gardeners reside in Housing Authority of McDonough County housing; 31 percent of these residents have a documented disability and 14 percent are elderly. Their disabilities include physical impairments such as cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, and vision impairment. Multiple mental illnesses, such as depression, are also well documented. The median income of Housing Authority residents is \$12,458 and the median income for a household in the county is \$32,141 (Personal Correspondence, Bill Jacobs, Housing Authority of McDonough County). These statistics reflect a growing economic divide in rural America that leaves many households food-insecure.

Between January 2010 and October 2011, to give a reality check to our ideas about gardening and environmental justice, we worked in the community garden alongside other gardeners, attended community garden events, and went to several promotional and educational events centered on the garden. We were able to conduct over 15 in-depth face-to-face

interviews and conducted four focus groups with a total of 40 participants. In addition we had long discussions over the course of the fieldwork with three key informants who voluntarily stepped into leadership roles in the garden. Finally, every time we pulled weeds, watered tomatoes, or dug potatoes alongside our fellow gardeners, we talked to and observed the general garden population.

What started as a garden project to allow people space to grow their own food has blossomed into something that is much more complex than anticipated. We were initially motivated to begin gardening because of our concerns about the globalization of our food system. Gardeners recognized—as both Shiva (2008) and Gottlieb and Joshi (2013) note—that the food crisis encompasses ecological, economic, cultural, and political factors. Having just returned from two weeks with Vandana Shiva at her organic farm Navdanya, McIlvaine-Newsad realized that our reasons for gardening paralleled Shiva's (2005) "food democracy" framework which argues that the globalized food systems is facing multiple problems: (1) it is not sustainable; (2) it is changing the face of agriculture; (3) millions are hungry and food insecure while; (4) those in developed nations are facing an obesity crisis. These themes mentioned by Shiva are the same ones initially identified by our fellow gardeners. As our findings illustrate, however, these gardeners later focused mainly on the sustainability of food sources and food security and not much on obesity. In our research we also identified repeatedly that community grew out of local environmental resistance to an unhealthy, unsafe food system; thus we would suggest adding that community-building be added as a fifth point in Shiva's "food democracy" framework.

## AN UNSUSTAINABLE, UNSAFE SYSTEM

Like Gottlieb (2005) and White (2011), we find that by engaging in community gardening, local citizens are not only providing themselves with fresh, organic, affordable produce, but they are also making a

conscious decision to resist large-scale agriculture and its dependence on environmentally unsafe practices. Community gardens with their ecological diversity provide a safeguard against diseases wiping out entire crops, and community gardens expand the notion of local sustainability as mentioned by Holland (2004). Building on work by Stocker and Barnett (1998), Holland writes that community gardens are agents of change in the ways in which community members create and manage community spaces, and disseminate community science and innovative technologies. Gardeners routinely learn from each other as they chat while working on their individual plots and share recipes for organically based pesticides and zucchini bread. For example, local low-income residents sought space to grow food with "no fertilizer, no chemicals" and as "a learning experience." One gardener asked, "Would people teach us what types of soil will grow stuff?"

## HUNGER & FOOD INSECURITY

People have turned to communal gardening during times of food insecurity for decades (Schmelzkopf 1995). Many of our gardeners remember growing up with victory gardens tended by their mothers or grandmothers during WWII. The fact that gardens tend to come about during crisis reflects the food security needs of community residents to produce inexpensive, healthy food for themselves (Ferris et al. 2001). Given the national economic downturn and the fiscal crisis facing the state of Illinois, one can certainly argue that the community is facing a time of significant economic uncertainty.

For many low-income populations, food insecurity may be directly related to transportation, access, and income. Scholars like Correia (2005) have noted that in many low-income urban neighborhoods, grocery stores are simply not available. Lawson and Knox (2002) note that supermarkets have fled neighborhoods in inner cities, which results in reduced competition between markets, and in turn, inflated food prices. In this context, Guthman

(2008) notes that many African-American neighborhoods are food deserts and that many of these neighborhoods desire grocery stores. In rural areas, a food desert may exist with no stores within a large radius (not just a neighborhood), or with one store cornering the market. A study conducted by Morris et al. (1992) of the rural U.S. found an average of 3.8 grocery stores per county. The unavailability or high price of produce may result in reliance by low-income people on inexpensive, storable food sources. Participants may make choices at the grocery store based on cost rather than healthfulness (Smith and Morton 2009). To counteract the lack of access to quality, affordable food for low-income populations, encouraging supermarkets to locate in food-insecure neighborhoods and creating community gardens and farmers' markets may be solutions (Winne 2008). As one gardener in Macomb stated, "It saved me quite a bit of money just getting it home grown."

Our community garden addresses the concerns of access, transportation, and income: as the garden is located within walking distance of public housing and on the public bus route, and the "rental fee" for a plot is \$20 per year. If someone is unable to afford the rental fee, a general fund pays the fee. In addition, local businesses have donated seeds and transplants making it possible to grow food at little or no cost to the gardener.

Still, the ability of residents to pursue gardening as a food security strategy may continue to be constrained by economic and environmental conditions (Smith and Morton 2009). In many Midwestern areas, including the one examined in this study, much of the locally available land may be taken up by large-scale commodities-based agriculture, leaving very expensive acreage or no acreage available to the general population. Many gardeners in Macomb understood how to garden but lacked adequate green space to do so. Thus, in the nation's breadbasket, local low-income populations with increasingly limited access to open space may be getting left behind in favor of a global market. In this context, the availability of the federal Housing and Urban Development Agency

land on which the garden sits was a boon for local gardeners seeking greater food safety and security.

Our original intention in finding garden space was to grow our own safe, healthy vegetables for our families. As other research has noted, community gardens are often sites where food activists seek to "serve" low-income or minority populations in ways that tend to reinforce white or wealthy value systems or cultures (Guthman 2008; Guthman 2011; Mares and Pena 2011). As noted above, some of our gardeners had belonged to community supported agriculture farms, which were expensive. Most of the gardeners are white and some of them were community leaders of non-profits or were university professors. In addition, our gardens did evolve partially to address the food security of low-income and disabled individuals. Thus, in some significant ways, our garden fit the mold described by Guthman (2008). However, part of our efforts were in resistance to alternative (expensive) food outlets such as community supported agriculture subscriptions, and many of our ideas and activities (e.g., donating excess to food banks) were initiated not by professors, researchers, or non-profit leaders but by low-income gardeners, senior citizens, and gardeners with disabilities.

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

We organized as an environmental justice movement mainly to address issues of food safety and security, yet our garden also is becoming a place of community that meets other needs. Much like Alaimo et al. (2010), working in Michigan, we are finding that the gardens in Macomb have quickly become a vehicle for social change as well as social and recreational benefits for gardeners. Many of the gardeners found meaning in serving others by distributing food to other gardeners, residents of the county's public housing not involved in the garden, and local food banks. Gardeners, however, were initially hesitant to share food with non-gardeners in our community. When leaders of the

movement asked, “Who gets to eat the produce?” an immediate answer was “We all do. I mean, why not?” Another gardener challenged this: “Do you really wanna give produce to someone who [didn’t help grow it]?” One gardener who was a Housing Authority resident organized residents into a food distribution initiative.

In addition to this Housing Authority on-site distribution, food goes to local food banks. Porter and another gardener, realizing they could not eat all the yellow squash and cucumbers produced one week, picked it and distributed it to local food banks. Soon thereafter, a table was placed at the garden where gardeners could donate extra produce. Gardeners have the first opportunity to take it. The leftover produce is then taken to food banks weekly. Again the desire to alleviate food insecurity—not just in their own lives, but in their neighbors’ as well—built community among gardeners, and the environmental justice implications of this movement spilled over into benefits to other gardeners and local low-income residents.

The need for food security also resulted in the building of a social community amongst garden participants, paralleling Flachs’ (2010) study in the Cleveland area. At one site, residents spent “about half an hour on average as far as people talking and enjoying being out there together.” The gardens became an integral leisure space in the community by providing a space where people could meet as a diverse group and form friendships. The community gardens have brought together many of us whose paths might not cross on a daily basis: low-income public housing residents, professors, factory workers and others. One gardener even noted that the relationships created by socializing encouraged gardeners who would have not have been comfortable in other settings: “It even impacted them socially, coming out of doing something instead of being in the apartment and being isolated, ’cause people have some mental illness and this was a good therapeutic thing for them.”

## CONCLUSION

In these ways, community gardens represent a sort of “double benefit” for low-income populations in the context of environmental justice: they not only remove the unhealthy problem of dependence on an unsafe, insecure food source *but also replace it* with an environmentally, socially, and individually healthy activity and food source. In reflecting on our community gardens and comparing it to the model by Vandana Shiva, we have found that concerns about community—for resiliency and leisured-based social opportunities—should be added for at least some contexts, while concern about the changing nature of agriculture is held by some portions of rural communities. These dual concerns about community and food security provide a potentially powerful connection between the ideal of environmental justice and the opportunities to make it happen.

Food insecurity and environmental injustice are large-scale problems. Some scholars, like World Bank economist David Pearce (2005), argue for the globalization and commodification of agriculture through multinational companies, contending that “Large-scale problems need large-scale solutions.” Conversely, our gardens are a small-scale response to the large-scale problems of food insecurity and environmental injustice. Two problems currently facing the gardens is the lack of cultural and ecological diversity. Although our community is predominantly white, our largest garden is located in a largely African American neighborhood. Yet, few people from this neighborhood garden with us beyond those residing at the public housing site. Ecologically, we grow what we know. The gardens are full of the same types of vegetables and are thus also ecologically homogeneous. How can we use the gardens as a vehicle of change that allows all of us to be more socially and ecological connected and diverse?

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