

Elizabeth Hodges Snyder • Kristen McIvor
Sally Brown
Editors

Sowing Seeds in the City

Human Dimensions

 Springer

Editors

Elizabeth Hodges Snyder
Department of Health Sciences
University of Alaska Anchorage
Anchorage, AK, USA

Kristen McIvor
Harvest Pierce County
Pierce Conservation District
Puyallup, WA, USA

Sally Brown
School of Environmental
and Forest Sciences
University of Washington
Seattle, WA, USA

ISBN 978-94-017-7454-3 ISBN 978-94-017-7456-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-7456-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016939230

Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2016

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Printed on acid-free paper

Springer Science+Business Media B.V. Dordrecht is part of Springer Science+Business Media
(www.springer.com)

A Case Study: Growing Community through Gardens in Chicago's Southwest Side

Nicole Llorens-Monteserin and Howard Rosing

There is now considerable scholarly interest in the relationship between urban food production and the environment, food access and health in U.S. cities. A discourse on “sustainability” pervades this growing urban agriculture literature but often with a utilitarian ideal, as if planting food in urban spaces is indeed a viable and sustainable route to economically feed the masses with healthy food, while protecting and improving the natural environment. These are, of course, research questions that are far from answered, especially given an increasingly urban/suburban country where corporations remain in control of the vast majority of food produced and distributed to cities. As scholars begin to explore the question of what “sustainable urban food systems” really mean in diverse geographic spaces, race and class disparities become central. Many if not most large U.S. cities are socially divided by race and/or class and the two often intersect in stark ways. Chicago is particularly segregated by race and class and this case study suggests that those interested in whether local production can become a sustainable way of provisioning cities must consider diverse voices of resilient populations living in economically distressed contexts. What do these populations think about growing food for themselves? What are their barriers to growing food in such settings? If resources are in place, why would or wouldn't they produce food? As a product of our ethnographic research, we suggest that those engaged in food systems development in cities consider how social, cultural and economic influences in diverse cultural settings define both possibilities for, and challenges of, expanding food production across urban spaces.

N. Llorens-Monteserin (✉) • H. Rosing
Irwin W. Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning and Community
Service Studies, Depaul University, Chicago, IL, USA
e-mail: Nicole.llorens@gmail.com; hrosing@depaul.edu

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2016
E.H. Snyder et al. (eds.), *Sowing Seeds in the City*,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-7456-7_21

269

hrosing@depaul.edu

Location and Context for Study

The location of our study is a section of Chicago's southwest side comprised of more than 80 % Latinos who are predominantly first and second-generation Mexicans. Median household income for the area is in the low \$30,000s and the vast majority of these are family or multi-family households. Though retail commercial activity thrives in the area, poverty and disinvestment from industry has taken its toll on residents, many of whom seek income in the low-wage service sector and in the informal economy, for example, as day laborers and in domestic service. As in many parts of the city, deindustrialization led to massive loss of jobs in what was once a manufacturing district. Low wage employment and individuals having multiple jobs is thus the norm. Though the area hosts vibrant commercial corridors with numerous retail food outlets, food access is a challenge for many residents. One can find people lined up daily at food pantries that dot the neighborhood and many residents strategize by visiting multiple pantries per week. Food access in this densely populated area is not about lack of food availability, but lack of income among other barriers. Our study offers a picture of what is happening with gardeners whose voices speak to motivations for and challenges with producing food in their community.

The community garden landscape in this area is fairly young, yet fast growing and is driven by strong community-based organizations. In recent years a variety of local community organizations have led the way in establishing and supporting gardens across the neighborhood. These include community development organizations focused on providing educational advancement or enrichment opportunities, fostering economic development and violence prevention, as well as social justice organizations that focus on building democracy at a grassroots level. Faith-based organizations such as churches, along with education and health care institutions, including local area clinics and schools, also support and maintain an active role in the neighborhood's garden scene. These organizations provide extensive support to the gardens: helping to locate and secure suitable land; soliciting, directing, and investing funds for the initial construction and continuing maintenance of the garden; acquiring necessary materials (e.g. tools, seeds, soil); recruiting and organizing participants; advising on project design and budget planning; providing ongoing technical assistance; and also helping to connect gardeners to a broader support network and to a variety of capacity building resources.

The gardens range in size from 3 gardeners to upwards of 30 families. Some were built on city-owned vacant land, in which cases the sponsoring community organization played a vital role in helping secure the space. The city's nonprofit urban land trust (Neighborspace.org) has a standing relationship with city agencies and facilitates the acquisition process, working directly with community members to establish community garden projects. A few gardens are located on privately owned lots and depend on the support of the sponsoring community organization for the negotiation of lease terms. Other gardens are located on school or church grounds and receive technical assistance from these organizations as well.

Though most gardens are connected to local organizations, as of the 2014 growing season there are no gardens in the neighborhood that remain unlocked or open to the public at all times. Many that once were open are now fenced and locked due to concerns over theft and vandalism, while others ceased operations after overseeing staff turnover and shifts in leadership at the sponsoring organization took effect. A similar trend from allotment or individual gardening to a shared-space and collective gardening model was also evident during the first 2 years of observations. This change in how the gardens were organized had a lot to do with difficulties faced during the gardens' early stages of development and growing seasons where low or inconsistent participation rates made it difficult to maintain allotments and distribute or share responsibilities. The newest community garden in the neighborhood, however, is returning to the old model of allotment gardening and is the first garden to charge participants a modest fee.

Most of the adult participants we encountered in the community gardens were Latino residents of the neighborhood—the majority from Mexico. Many gardens hosted student volunteer groups that included Latino and African American youth from local-area schools. Otherwise, most gardeners were women—mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and caretakers connected through their children and local area schools with which they were often actively involved. These women included some from rural towns with experience in horticulture/agriculture and others from urban centers with little to no gardening education. On the contrary, of the relatively few men who participated in community gardening, the majority had a background or particular interest in agriculture.

Most of the community gardeners in the neighborhood are middle-aged adults and small children, with little representation from young adult and adolescent populations. One study conducted by a local community organization found that 67 % of their gardeners were above the age of 30, with only a third of survey respondents listed as 30 years of age or younger. There is, however, significant participation at the gardens from families with young children. Although not all are necessarily actively involved with gardening activities, several gardens host a range of other activities—from arts programming to science related projects—that target neighborhood kids.

Project Design

Throughout the course of 3 years, we engaged in ethnographic research together with local community partners to gain access to the gardens and build rapport with the gardeners themselves. We actively participated in garden workdays, planning sessions, garden coalition meetings, gardening workshops, and annual harvest festivals, as well as other activities held at the gardens, including wellness promotion events such as health and nutrition informational sessions, and recreational classes (e.g. aerobics and knitting). We also attended larger community events such as a Chicago Park District community meeting on the status of a new neighborhood park

that was to incorporate a community garden space and a Community Quality of Life Plan participatory planning meeting that covered green space and community gardening as a priority. In total, researchers recorded over 40 fieldnote entries consisting of separate objective and subjective observations. In addition to participant observation, the investigation included 12 in-person gardener interviews each lasting 30 min to an hour. Two interviews were conducted in pairs, making a total of 14 interviewees. These included 11 female and 3 male gardeners (a fairly accurate representation of the gender distribution evidenced in the gardens), coming from eight different gardens, under the auspices of four different local community organizations.

Analysis consisted of coding interviews and field notes, employing a word or short phrase that symbolized a summative attribute identified in the narratives. These attributes were analyzed for patterns that were, in turn, synthesized into overarching themes.

Gleaning from interactions with gardeners, including both interviews and experiences in the field, several common themes arose as motivations for community gardening. These included: advocacy, beautification, economic and community development, asserting cultural identity, improving diet (access, cost, taste, safety)/control of sustenance, enjoyment and relaxation (distraction), educating youth, gardening education and sharing of agricultural knowledge, health benefits, connecting with nature, recreation and socializing. There were, however, two overarching themes that dominated discussions of motivations to community gardening: education and community building.

Motivations: Educating Youth and the Community

Education as a motivating factor focused on three different targets—youth, adults, and the community at large. Most commonly mentioned was the idea that community gardens provide ample opportunity for youth engagement. Gardeners were keenly aware of the benefits and opportunities community gardening provides for the many young people in their midst. Gardening families with histories in agriculture had a space to impart that knowledge and those skills while sharing valuable experiences with their kids. Parents concerned with their children being brought up in an urban environment with limited access to green space and little understanding of natural processes, especially related to food and agriculture, appreciated providing their children with exposure to the fundamentals of growing food. Overall, gardens were valued as a space to connect with children, allowing for a type of bonding that is often sparse or missing from modern home life.

We see [community gardening] as a demonstration for our children, because we don't do it to have a lot, like for an abundance [of food] ... For me more than anything is this. And to transmit to people the truth about where our nourishment comes from.

Youth education at the gardens was also related to a kind of “counter-education”—an alternative to the education youth receive on the streets, from the media, and

other potentially detrimental sources of information. One woman spoke of the important role the gardens played in imparting a different reality to her kids, other than the violence experienced in the community:

We also live in a community where there is violence, so then it's also for those little ones, to change their world even a little bit, right? And they're also more aware of the environment and how to eat healthier also. So I want to point to that too as my motivations—that there is a different way to live and it isn't a life where things are always bad, there is always many good things we can find even if we're just a neighborhood here, not the best kind, but there are good things we can share among the whole community... you can create and you can change too. So then, when they see more kids, more people involved doing good, I think that people that aren't, young kids that aren't maybe headed in good footsteps, will back off because there are more of us who are in the right, no? I think that is also a part of changing our neighborhoods a little bit. And besides I like living in my neighborhood, I mean I love it! So I say, little by little we can change it.

Another interviewee noted:

I notice how much it pleases [the kids], they see their mom removing dirt and placing soil over a little plant, and they like seeing that. I say it is also a beautiful thing for them because they are learning that destruction is not all there is in life, but rather caring, flowers, and vegetables.

Participants noted additional topics youth were exposed to at the gardens including the origins of food, healthy living, work ethic, the idea of community, as well as cultural and spiritual values.

Interviewees also strongly emphasized the sharing of knowledge among gardeners and instruction for adults that took place at the gardens. This included gardening education as well as nutrition and wellness instruction, both formally (hosted workshops) and informally (between gardeners). When asked what motivated the gardeners, one interviewee responded that they came in large part, "to share knowledge about agriculture, about sowing seeds, about everything [the gardeners] know because they bring a great variety of knowledge acquired in their homeland and they like to share it with others." In another example, a woman spoke candidly about her health related to her dietary choices and lack of knowledge in the kitchen:

Don't know how to cook much and sometimes I felt certain foods just tasted bad, but some of the women [at the garden] have more experience... they would tell me that this plant is good for cooking chicken, this one for pork, or this one is good for stomach pains, then I was learning.

Many gardeners felt that their participation served as a way to spread awareness throughout the community about the significance of community gardening in the larger context of food, social justice and development. In this sense, gardening to them was a form of advocacy for their neighbors and friends with the hope of gaining their support and growing the movement.

I see a lot of value [in community gardening] because I think we still have a lot to learn... For me the good thing is that you're eating healthy and protecting your body. I've always said learning from other people and teaching people, children and youth more than anything, that yes we can because there are so many places where there is nothing, enough to be able to harvest our own crops. And for me this is important so as not to spend so much money at the stores and protect our bodies. This way we begin to teach ourselves as a community.

Motivations: Community Building

Gardeners felt motivated by a strong sense of duty and love for the neighborhood, its people and the place. They see gardening as contributing to both the social framework and physical environment of their community.

Just the simple fact to see our neighborhood better. We see a lot of lonely houses, on sale, that have taken a long time to sell and well that garden is there to beautify... It is more pleasing to the eye to see flowers, green space, instead of cement, all sad looking...

To take out the cement and have our own garden there and our own flowers, because most of the time we don't have that. A grandmother of mine back in Mexico, she used to say—in a house, if there is no plant or any flower, it is as if there were no women. Also like that [here] now, not having flowers, gardens, smelly herbs around, I feel that there is no woman...

It's improvement, that you don't see a lot so ugly that it scares you to walk by, and to suddenly see it as something beautiful, gardens. I think that we all like green spaces, places with flowers. And then it also comes to serve us as a place to talk, like a good pretext to get to know each other. We are, we have a lot in common since we're not from here. We come from other places and [at the garden] we can allow ourselves to know one another, what one's birthplace is like, what they cultivate there and how they cultivate certain plants that often times we don't know about, or fruits we've not even heard about.

Through their participation, gardeners invest in relationships built on trust and cooperation, while transforming unproductive space and beautifying the neighborhood. Simply put, in the words of one gardener, "it is about taking some personal time to coexist with other people and do something good for the whole community and for oneself. Because we really have a good time when we meet there, when we get together." Furthermore, as part of a largely immigrant community, many gardeners described how the gardens provide a space to reconnect with their culture through agriculture within a unique social context.

Above everything else, what I liked most was the first time we picked, like some smelly herbs and I brought them home to cook and the taste was totally different. That means that what we cultivated, what we harvested fresh, we brought the smell and taste of our country, because [there] everything is more natural, more fresh. Here no—everything is frozen or canned. And for us that have been missing our country because our roots are there, so anything that can remind us where we come from we like. Being with my people, harvesting tomatoes, peppers, products we use for our daily consumption, that is what I liked most.

The degree of consensus among gardeners that gardens are there to educate and that they enhance their community's value by strengthening ties and spreading awareness demonstrates an understanding and acknowledgement of potential long-term benefits. These activities, as valued by the gardeners themselves, should be considered as central to building food access over time and not detached. While the motivations to community gardening were fairly constant across all gardens, the challenges or obstacles faced by the gardeners were more specific to each garden and varied between sites. Nevertheless, the most common challenges that were faced at every site to some degree were difficulties related to participation and water.

Challenges: Participation

Gardeners repeatedly listed concerns over the lack of commitment or consistency in participation from a greater number of people. This included difficulties in recruiting and retaining members. A survey conducted by one of the local area partner organizations found that 80 % of respondents had been participating in their community gardens for less than a year, with only 20 % for a year or more. During the last three years of observations, there has been relatively high turnover of garden participants. While a core group of gardeners typically remains, numbers beyond these active members fluctuate. At one site in particular, the garden virtually ceased operations, producing no harvest, because of a drop off in participation and inability of the sponsoring organization to manage the space without sufficient commitment or sense of ownership from participants and the surrounding community.

Whether originating from within the garden or from the greater community, gardeners seemed to perceive low or varying participation rates as often stemming from negative perceptions of gardening activities. They expressed frustration with how people in the community don't seem to value the importance of their work, "we have talked to the community here and with other communities and still some don't seem to value agriculture. I don't understand why really." Gardeners were especially discouraged with cases of theft and vandalism, which demonstrated an extreme lack of respect for the garden, which they felt devalued their hard work.

The first ones who were involved planted but without the security of the fence or anything and [the community] didn't respect [the garden]. They threw everything, took everything out. Then people lost their motivation and didn't want to keep on like that. They wanted well, to be more secure so that they wouldn't ruin things. Because what was the point of planting if they were going to destroy it and weren't going to respect it?

We would plant but we would not harvest. When we'd arrive, there was nothing left. And that angers you, it frustrates you because you say—all that heat, I went there and brought them, I went and planted them, and moved the soil for not even a handful of chiles. Because I'd leave them to ripen and when I'd come back they'd be gone. Now I think this year we'll harvest them more green or unripe, because we'll never get to see them ripe. Just because people aren't respecting us. And well, focused on that, people don't respect us.

The gardeners were often dissatisfied with how disagreements and conflict were handled within the garden. There were instances when some were deterred from further or continued participation because of interpersonal conflicts, clashing personalities, differences of opinion and/or beliefs on how to care for the garden or manage the space and people.

Sometimes we would have meetings and they would go water, but they would bring their kids and what they would do... or their dogs would misbehave in there. And that's not [the purpose], this isn't a dog park nor a childcare center. Of course it is to some extent, but only if and when the adult is responsible for the child. Not to destroy it. That was a big problem.

Gardeners were also quick to point out how neighborhood economics might affect people's ability to value, let alone participate in community gardening, noting

how residents of their community tend to be limited on time or perceive gardening as too time consuming, making them largely unavailable for gardening activities.

Of course the labor, I mean people, not people but sometimes kids or folks... well we live in a challenging, the neighborhood, the community is a challenge because of economics, unemployment, drugs, violence, so it's often like money is the bottom line. So for adults, mainly for adults I'm speaking of, they don't see the benefit from working the garden or having an urban garden. They do have it, but usually it's like, to make pretty stuff. Or just like really simple, one or two herbs, cilantro or peppers. But it's a challenge because again the community, money is the bottom line, so they don't. There's a lot of work that needs to be involved in gardening and maintaining it.

Even for those with dedicated interest, it is a constant challenge to balance time commitments between family, household, and work responsibilities. When asked what were some of the primary obstacles the garden faced, one gardener responded:

[We need] more people to get involved, but I can tell you not everybody can. I mean, we're all, how do you say, after the pot of beans for our house. In other words, we can't all [get involved]. I have a job that I leave for at five in the morning and sometimes I'm home by 10 or 11. I say, ok, I have a lot of time... But not all of us have that schedule, I mean some have to go much later, and who might only go to say hello and bye because we already did what we needed to do.

Metaphoric reference to residents all going after a "pot of beans" illustrates the powerful challenge to not necessarily accessing fresh food, but to having the time to do so. As another gardener expressed, time may be one of the primary challenges to sustainable food production in low-income immigrant neighborhoods:

Sometimes it is a little bit difficult because I tell you what I've been saying for some time, that I'm not coming anymore. But I am one of the ones who has been here, now I've been going to school, but I've been constant. And for me it is a little bit heavy on the system that I have to go, I'm going to school, get back from work, I have to take my kids to their program and run to school, but I couldn't make it to the garden in the afternoon, I would go at night.

The perceived valuation of community gardens within the neighborhood, as a time consuming and contentious undertaking, may further suggest that providing for household food security itself, in the form of income stability, becomes a challenge or barrier to successfully engaging in community gardening and reaping the long term benefits toward greater community and household resilience that it might provide.

Challenges: Water

A second major challenge faced by the gardens was either access to water or the cost of water. Out of the eight gardens frequented during our study, about half had rain catchment systems or reservoirs, but they still relied heavily on additional sources for their water supply. The reservoirs provided insufficient amounts of

water and the gardeners could not fill them up fast enough. This problem was exacerbated throughout a summer drought; during which time the plastic tanks were also exposed to intense heat and sunlight, causing the water temperature to rise to unusable levels. Many borrowed water from neighbors, whom they would have to reimburse. Others were able to get a key from the city for a nearby fire hydrant, but would still need to carry heavy hoses to and from, across long distances. Not surprisingly, one gardener expressed how this water challenge alone was enough to deter otherwise interested individuals from participating.

Many of the mothers kind of lost their motivation because of the water issue. Because it wasn't just connecting [a hose], I mean it was help me get the hoses out, connect them all, unravel them... So it wasn't just, oh yes, just spray a little water on there and that's it, having fun. No, again, help me put it all back, no? And it is heavy too, the city's key.

Only four gardens had easy access to water, usually from an adjacent building, but these gardeners complained that the water bill was simply too high.

We have water from a hose, a water spigot. But we do have to pay for all the water. As a church, I know there is a program so that we wouldn't have to pay for the water and I worked on it with the alderman's office... I was talking with them about it. And according to them they filled out an application so that we wouldn't have to pay for the water, and it never happened, it never happened. We would get bills for 700 to 800 dollars.

Conclusions

Giving voice to gardeners such as those above contributes to better understanding the cultural diversity of urban contexts within which people seek to build urban food systems. As scholarly interest in urban and community food systems grows, we suggest that consideration be taken for diverse views on the meaning of "sustainable food production." Utilitarian notions about poor people planting food to feed themselves disregard the complexity of the real motivations for, and practicalities of, food production among low-income populations within varied cultural settings. Researchers should consider the many unanswered questions about what makes food production sustainable among such populations. As scholars begin to further explore urban agriculture in cities, the questions of how and why people are involved in local food production and the social and economic barriers to their success become central. Race and class marginalization from alternative food movements may be one of the broadest challenges to building sustainable urban food systems, especially given that populations living on the economic margins, and most often communities of color, often make up the majority population of cities. Infusing voices of gardeners from these settings into academic and policymaking discourses, and highlighting their unique motivations and challenges, offers opportunities for understanding how to grow a larger community of sustainable food producers in U.S. cities.