

A GROWING MOVEMENT: MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING COMMUNITY GARDENS

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ABSTRACT

Community gardens play an important role in building urban resilience through improving food security and by increasing neighbourhood social capital. As community gardens become more popular in many countries, understanding what motivates people to join them and stay involved is, therefore, worth researching. This paper explores the key motivations of community gardeners using data from interviews conducted with people involved in a range of community gardens on the east coast of Australia (including Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Sydney) as well as two locations in Denmark (Copenhagen and Odense). Our analysis synthesised three main categories of motivation which are broadly described as “individual”, “community” and “gardening”. Individual motivations included: a retirement activity; educating one’s own children about growing and eating good food; access to organic produce; alternative to supermarket food; and personal learning, enjoyment and satisfaction. Community motivations included: civic action; a way to meet people when new to the neighbourhood; growing food for charities; teaching children to interact with the community; and community-based social activity. Gardening motivations included: being outdoors; enjoying nature; access to earth; and growing food plants. While community gardening is often cited as a sustainable activity, the environment only emerged once as a key focus in relation to organic food production. Interestingly, there was still evidence of sustainable practices such as community composting and pesticide-free growing across all sites. The range of motivations show that the gardens go some way towards improving the quality of life in urban environments through providing intergenerational social interactions which are enjoyable, increasing local social capital and inadvertently improving local food security and sustainability.

Keywords: community gardens, motivations, sustainability, social capital, community.

1 INTRODUCTION

Community gardens play an important role in improving sustainability of urban environments by providing social, economic and environmental benefits. They can reduce alienation, build social capital, and improve food security, thereby leading to increased urban resilience to disasters [1]. Finding out what motivates people to join and stay involved in community gardens is therefore important. This paper analyses and synthesizes categories of key motivations using data from interviews conducted with participants involved in community gardens on the east coast of Australia (including Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Sydney) and in Denmark (Copenhagen and Odense).

The next section gives a brief summary of the literature as a background to our analysis. The methods, results, analysis and discussion are then provided. Overall a wide range of motivations are identified, but while sustainability is practiced, it surprisingly does not feature as a stated primary motivation amongst the participants.

2 BACKGROUND

Community gardens are established and/or maintained by members of the local population for both individual and collective benefits. They provide a public venue that improves social interactions between local residents [2], [3] and are particularly important where traditional links between neighbours have been weakened by population mobility and isolation [4], [5].



This research is timely because community gardening is a growing trend in many countries. The total number of community gardens registered with Australian Community Gardens Network grew by 250% between 2010 and 2016 to 600 [6]. Community gardens emerged in Singapore in 2005 and by 2008 there were 240 [7]. In 2007, the American Community Garden Association estimated that there were 18,000 to 20,000 community gardens in the USA and Canada combined [8].

There is a great deal of literature on the benefits which individuals and society receive from community gardens, which include: providing food to impoverished residents; crime prevention; beautifying an area; enacting 'Local Agenda 21' (LA21); exercise; civic engagement; enjoyment; access to fresh organic food; increased social capital; improved nutrition and wellbeing; educational opportunities (nutrition, work skills); and community building [2], [3], [5], [9], [10]. The literature generally shows that community gardens bring positive outcomes for individuals and their community. For example, in Singapore, elderly members benefitted from the connection with nature and the nostalgic aspect of the gardens reminding them of their farming days in pre-urbanised Singapore [7]. In Melbourne, Australia, community gardening reduced social isolation by providing an opportunity for neighbours to meet each other [11]. In West Hollywood, USA, community garden participants increased their physical activity by 6% and increased their fruit and vegetable consumption by 10% [12]. Ohmer et al. [13] found that community gardens improve access to green space in densely urbanised neighbourhoods. Galdini [5] noted that community gardens improve social cohesion and vitality in Berlin. Several studies show community gardens are an avenue for providing an alternative to modern food production and distribution [14]–[16]. School gardens draw in the community by encouraging parents, relatives and neighbours to be involved as volunteers [2], [17].

Some of the motivations identified in the literature include: a desire to grow organic, locally grown, seasonally appropriate food [3], [12], [18]; a need for cheap food, or to find an alternative to modern food production and distribution [14], [15]; the desire to connect with nature [19]; the motive to promote and enact environmental sustainability [2]; and the desire to be part of a community, sharing produce and working cooperatively [15]. The motivations are varied and in the main indicate a desire to address individual, social, and environmental issues that arise within contemporary urban society.

3 METHODS

The research question being explored by this study is: What motivates people to join and take part in community gardening? We address this question by interviewing participants from a variety of different types of community gardens in different locations [20], [21]. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders sought to identify the broad range of motivations of community garden participants. Key stakeholders included: members, volunteers, visitors, and authorities who provide advice/support. They cover a broad range of people and urban environments. Answers have been analysed by coding the data into themes using NVIVO.

The data collection stage is not complete. To date, 24 interviews have been conducted. The case study sites include 4 community gardens in Australia (1 Sydney, 2 Brisbane, 1 Gold Coast) and 2 in Denmark (1 Copenhagen, 1 Odense). All six gardens employed sustainable practices as evidenced by organic growing, mulching, harvesting rainwater, seed-saving, composting and two also included native bee keeping.



4 FINDINGS

Our research generated three main categories of motivations:

- Individual;
- Community; and
- Gardening.

In addition, it should be noted that numerous participants included multiple motivations in their initial response. Each of the three themes is described and then example (de-identified) participant quotes are provided.

4.1 Individual

The “Individual” motivations theme emerged from comments which illustrated personal satisfaction, individual benefits and enjoyment as motivations for joining a community garden.

Growing and eating organic produce and access to an alternative to supermarket food were primary motivations for a number of interviewees:

I enjoy that you know where it's come from, that it's organic. You can grow what you want. (Australia 4)

I was just getting things from the shops that were seasonal, but I really didn't know what I was getting. And I've learnt, you know, in the time I've been here my children – my teenagers – will eat more vegetables. I think it's the taste factor. And you know that it's organic – it's something you've grown yourself. (Australia 4)

The personal enjoyment and satisfaction of growing food and being in a garden environment were motivators for some gardeners:

I get a huge amount of satisfaction out of having things I've grown that I can eat. I mean, in financial terms, it's nonsense. (Australia 1)

It's just nice being outside and doing stuff. (Australia 2)

Some participants were motivated by a desire to gain new skills and learn about gardening, while others were keen to educate their children:

I just thought it would be nice to just grow a few things and just actually learn about it because I don't really know anything about gardening. (Australia 1)

...since the kids, I just thought it (gardening) would be nice for them and ... so they can learn that it doesn't just come from the store. Like, the first time my son saw an orange on a tree like he just didn't get it, you know? It was just like at a friend's house at Marrickville or something he just – cause he'd only ever see stuff to come from a supermarket and then it was just like “What!” (Australia 1)

Several gardeners were motivated to find an activity to spend their time on which would also provide opportunities for the company that community gardening provides. Amongst this motivation group were retired gardeners and an under-employed local resident:

I know what times they're there, so if I feel like some company, I come down in the morning. Tam will be here or Fred will be here and I'll just be able to chat. (Australia 4)



One gardener was spoken of as motivated by publicity for their business.

A chef – who opened a restaurant and went around to schools and various organisations and asked us if we could set aside part of one of our plots so she could grow some Vietnamese mint, right? And we said yes, and she did, and then at the end of the year she invited us all up to come and have a meal at the restaurant. But it was very interesting because this story, there’s a whole lot of media coverage about all of this, you know. And for the life of me, I don’t think she ever came and harvested any of the mint. We’ve got this huge stand of Vietnamese mint there. (Australia 1)

Individual motivations included a desire to meet and spend time with people; to learn new skills and teach their own children about gardening; and personal satisfaction and enjoyment. Respondents in this category primarily spoke of benefits to themselves as the primary motivation for joining a community garden.

4.2 Community

The “Community” motivations theme emerged from comments which illustrated motivations to be more involved with the community; to improve the community through civic action; teaching the children to interact with the community; and neighbourhood social activity.

Several gardeners were motivated to join their community garden so they and/or their children could experience community involvement, as it was seen as a safe place to teach children how to interact with the community:

I think probably the whole, participating in the community thing because when I grew up, it wasn’t really like that where I lived, although maybe because my family wasn’t particularly involved. We weren’t that type of family and I think that I want the children to have a little bit of that, you know? And also going to talk to different people and, as you can see, one that keeps calling out is extremely like interactive and he will just talk and talk and talk and talk. And, fortunately, most people there really like talking to him <laughs> So it’s sort of good for that. (Australia 1)

Some of the key stakeholders who had roles as organisers of their local community garden were motivated to enact a sense of civic duty to improve the resources or integration of the community:

I think community gardens – yeah – because it’s a focus on a local space and it’s your time and – it’s your community and I think that people need to invest in their community if they’re going to be happy. (Australia 2)

Some gardeners at one inner city garden were motivated to start a community garden to help provide their local community with much needed public greenspace:

There’s not much green space in the area, so it’s a way to get more open space and just have a nice area where people can hang out and like the actual gardening part of it – it’s nice. We have a garden at home, as well. The actual gardening part is secondary, I think. <laughs> (Australia 3)

The main motivation that the library staff had to start a community garden in a residential development’s public courtyard outside their library was to help improve community cohesion:



It is an opportunity to make people meet across age and cultures and languages.... Making people meet just because they are different is not really working. What makes people come together is if they share a common interest. It is not like, 'OK I can just go and meet people from Pakistan and Turkey, but what is the point? But if we can go and garden together, I would like to do that.' (Denmark 1)

Other interviewees were motivated in a community sense as they sought a way to meet people when new to the neighbourhood and others were motivated by growing food for local charities. “Community” motivated participants focused on the social aspect of the group activity and/or the beneficial community outcomes.

4.3 Gardening

The “Gardening” motivations theme emerged from comments which illustrated a desire to access public green space for gardening, experiencing nature, or other outdoor purposes.

Living in housing with limited access to space for gardening or play activities motivated a number of gardeners to join their local community garden:

We live in a duplex, so we haven't got a lot of room to grow our own veggies and so forth. ... We've got things in pots, but it's just nice to have that little bit of extra bit of dirt to play in. (Australia 4)

Yeah I love bringing dogs around/a lot of people bring dogs to run around here. I like to bring the dog to run around. Border collie. It has a little play out the front here. Yeah it is great. (Australia 4)

Although no children were interviewed, adults mentioned that the activity of gardening was very popular amongst the children:

It's nice to do something, especially with the kids outside. They really like it. It's just nice doing something outside. (Australia 2)

The children are very proud of their gardens. (Denmark 2)

Connection with the earth and biophilia (connection with nature) were motivators for some participants:

It's nice to – so, just a lovely thing to do, get your hands in the dirt <laughs>. Watch things grow <laughs>. (Australia 4)

Oh, I love gardening. I love being outside.... I find it relaxing. (Australia 3)

The gardening motivation included access to open green space and gardening space and/or access to organic produce. When discussing their community garden, participants noted practices which could be identified as sustainable practices such as composting, recycling, mulching, harvesting rainwater and growing without the use of chemicals. Environmental action or sustainability as a concept was not mentioned and was not included as a primary motivation of any participants.

4.4 Mixed motivations

Mixed motivations featured frequently, in particular the combination of “community” and “gardening”, for example:



I was hoping I would just learn a bit more about gardening. And also I'm just yeah I like to hang out with local community members. So it is social as well. (Australia 2)

It's good for the kids. It's a nice community activity as well, and also the idea of there being fresh produce growing nearby, that's good. (Australia 2)

The combined motivations of “community” and “gardening” reflect a desire to garden with other people. Many of the participants noted that they had sufficient gardening space at home, but they wanted to garden with other community members.

4.5 Demotivation

It is also worth considering demotivating factors, as these erode the motivational enthusiasm of participants and may impact the longevity of the community gardens. For example, some enthusiastic gardeners were demotivated by vandalism:

Our garden is not locked, so anybody can walk into it and because of that, it suffers a fair bit of pilfering, it suffers a fair bit of vandalism, ... some people are shooting up drugs in there so it can be a pretty frustrating place to try and grow veges... All of us have been discouraged by that and you know at times I think everybody I know that has been down there has said I am going to give this up, it is just too hard. But we still keep battling on thinking let's not let 'em beat us. (Australia 1)

Several community garden organisers noted that some local residents who joined the community garden were less motivated than they initially thought:

People join with different levels of enthusiasm and there's sort of that turnover of people that think it's a great idea, but then they realise, or they just don't know, they've got a garden full of weeds. (Australia 4)

None of the community gardens investigated so far had difficulty in maintaining enough members to keep their garden going. Active members noted that competing priorities or moving neighbourhoods rather than lost motivation were the main causes of former members withdrawing from their community garden.

5 DISCUSSION

Our analysis generated three main categories of motivation which are broadly described as: “individual”, “community” and “gardening”. Mixed motivations featured prominently, and, as might be expected of community gardeners, the most frequent combination was of “community” and “gardening”.

The three emerging themes of Individual, Community and Gardening mirror three of the five “Hierarchy of Needs” from Maslow’s Theory of Motivation. The theory argues that human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs. The three motivations in the case of these community gardens are physiological needs; love and belonging; and self-actualisation [22].

Physiological needs are evidenced by “gardening” and include growing food and access to green space. Some community gardeners were motivated to gain control over the production and distribution of one of our most basic needs – food – through by-passing the supermarket; providing medicinal or ethnic foods not available in the market place; and/or growing local organic food.

Love and belonging can be seen in reference to a desire for a sense of “community” and in seeking out friendship and belonging to a group. The social aspect is evidenced in those



community gardeners motivated to get to know people in the neighbourhood; share resources and produce; learn together; feel a part of a community; and/or combat loneliness.

Self-actualisation mirrors the “Individual” category, where community gardeners are motivated by a desire to be a good parent, a good citizen; self-improvement through learning new skills and knowledge; and/or to feel a sense of accomplishment.

The point at which the three broad motivations for joining a community garden intersect may have one (or more) factor in common. City residents are seeking more control of their immediate environment as an antidote to alienation by growing local “community”.

Sustainability, although not stated as a motivation, is enacted direct action, contributing to a larger environmental movement. Sustainability is embedded in the choice of community gardening as an activity but is not always explicitly recognised by the participants. The literature pointed to environmental motivations of many community gardens in the forms of sustainability action and environmental education [2], [17], [19], [23]. While the environment is often cited as a community garden motivation, in our study the environment only emerged once as a key focus for one respondent in relation to organic food production. Interestingly, there was evidence of sustainable practices, such as community composting and pesticide-free growing, across all sites (Australia and Denmark) and native bee keeping in two Australian sites. So surprisingly the improvements in sustainability appear to be a by-product of other motivations.

People’s actions are shaped by their environment and they in turn shape their environment by their actions. A community garden is often an untidy place in a world of straight lines and hard surfaces. Community Gardens are a place where the people make the rules. Wright-Mills [24] wrote of the sociological imagination that: “By the fact of his (sic) living, he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove”. The community gardeners, by gardening in an urban public space, contribute to the shaping of his/her city and society, to the course of its history and direction of its future.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The range of motivations revealed by our research show that community gardens go some way towards improving quality of life in urban environments, through providing enjoyable intergenerational social interactions in a nature-based environment. The individual motivations revealed by community gardeners varied, however overall indicate that they seek involvement with their community in an outdoor environment by growing organic food together. The community gardeners increase local social capital and inadvertently improve local food security and sustainability skills. Investigating these motivations is important because they can help to shape more effective strategies for addressing problems associated with modern urban life. This may in turn inform debates about wellbeing in cities and feed into planning policy. Community gardens are not a system level change and in themselves are unlikely to be a universal panacea for urban problems, but lessons learned here could be incorporated into the wellbeing of a city. The research may help inform on a role for city authorities to assist, facilitate or to plan for and support community gardeners. From an academic standpoint, this research may be important by uniquely drawing together a range of social theories on social capital, motivations, wellbeing, sustainability, civic engagement, environmental education, social inclusion and place-making. It is hoped that this research will be of value to community gardeners, urban planners, environmentalists, alternative food networks and academics who research such topics.



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