

Community Gardens

A selection of facts and resources supported by research

2024

Overview

Community Gardens are spaces managed by the people who live in a particular area, generally with a goal of growing fresh fruits and vegetables. Oftentimes community gardens overlap with urban forestry and food forests because of their potential to produce fruits and vegetables as well as provide canopy and greenery.

Food Sovereignty

“Food sovereignty is the **right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food** produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance).

Food Apartheid

The term “food apartheid” is a way of describing the **structural injustices and disparities in food access** faced by low-income communities and communities of color. The term “food desert” is also sometimes used to describe areas with less access to healthy food. However, desert is often associated with something naturally occurring, as opposed to the reality that differences in access to food are the result of decades of discriminatory planning and policy decisions (Washington, n.d.).

Benefits of Community Gardens

- Community Gardens are a great opportunity to **empower** community members by involving everyone in the process of designing, building, maintaining, and enjoying the space (*Community Gardens*, n.d.).
- People who strongly identify with nature, who enjoy being in nature, and who had more frequent garden visits were more likely to have a stronger sense of **social cohesion** (Oh et al., 2022).
- Community gardens have been found to have many benefits including **bridging social and generational divides**, helping individuals save money on groceries, increasing access to fresh produce, and improving the mental health of community garden participants (Delshad 2022).
- People who joined a community garden have been found to be more likely to eat a **healthy** number of **fruits and vegetables** on a daily basis (Manzanete, 2021).

Cultural Belonging and Exchange

- Community gardens can help increase **cultural ties and economic opportunities**. Little Haiti Garden in Miami is one example of a garden where recent immigrants use their knowledge of traditional farming techniques to grow callaloo and calabaza (MacKenzie, 2016).
- One study of refugee gardeners in Midwestern cities of the United States found that gardening practices are an important way to **promote inclusive views of agriculture, cities, and sustainability** for these communities (Strunk and Richardson, 2019).
- A study comparing two different urban gardens in food insecure areas of New York found that longevity and success of the garden's food justice efforts were connected to strong ties to neighborhood and nonprofit organizations as well as involvement of individuals with knowledge as well as commitment to the importance of growing food for the community (Aptekar and Myers, 2020).
- A garden at the Arab American National Museum in Michigan helps immigrants stay **connected to their roots** by growing plants such as red and purple figs, grape vine, olive tree, amaranth, thyme, red lettuce, cherry tomatoes, flat parsley, green onions, strawberries, and jasmine. The garden also highlights the importance of gardening to local members of the refugee and immigrant community by displaying signs with cultural histories alongside the plants (Kai-Hwa Wang, 2023).
- Community gardens are important to **increase food security** as well as sense of cultural belonging for many immigrant and refugee communities (Harris et al, 2014).
- In community gardens, **families with children can spend time together outside**, meet others with similar backgrounds, as well as get to know people from other parts of the community (HIAS, 2023).
- When planning an inclusive garden, it is helpful to consider whether different people will easily be able to access the site and have enough space to grow the plants important to them. It is also recommended to avoid requiring formal management meetings or aesthetic practices. It is likely that food justice will not be achieved solely through the gardens, so continuing to advocate for additional access and other programs is important (Turner, 2021).

Habitat for Bees, Birds, and Other Animals

- Adding diverse plantings to a community garden can, over time, **increase the presence of beneficial insects and pollinators such as native bees** (Pawelek et al., 2009).
- Planting different types of fruiting trees and shrubs are **especially beneficial to animals who eat nuts, berries, and seeds in different seasons**, even if they are not edible to humans. It is also helpful to provide nesting habitats for birds with evergreens, small dense shrubs, and groundcover plants (Fort Williams Park Foundation, 2016).

Case Studies

Ron Finley "Gangsta Gardener," South Central Los Angeles, CA

Finley began an effort to combat food apartheid by planting food such as avocados and bananas behind his house and exchanging them with community members for donations. He has since created a nonprofit as well as a Master Class (Toone, 2024).

Langton Green Community Farm: Millersville, MD

This example is based within a residential community that supports adults with intellectual disabilities. The farm provides training and work opportunities, as well as food and income (*Langton Green Community Farm*, n.d.).

Marvin Gaye Greening Center: Washington D.C.

Incorporated within this park and cultural hub is an educational site that includes farm beds and hoop houses, an orchard, a stage, and an outdoor kitchen for the community (*Marvin Gaye Greening Center, in Partnership with Washington Parks & People*, n.d.).

Resources

Websites

- **Nature Sacred Fire Souls:** <https://naturesacred.org/our-work/firesoul-network/firesouls/>
- **Native Roots Farm Foundation:** <https://www.nativerootsde.org/>
- **USDA Urban Growers:** <https://www.farmers.gov/your-business/urban-growers>
- **Cooperative Gardens Hubs:** <https://www.coopgardens.org/>
- **Pollinator Pathway:** <https://www.pollinator-pathway.org/>
- **Brooklyn Botanic Garden:**
https://www.bbg.org/article/make_your_garden_a_haven_for_insect_diversity

How To

- **Karen the Farmer:** <https://www.karenthefarmer.com/faq-index>
- **City of Vancouver Plan for Inclusive Community Gardens:**
https://sustain.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/2014-02_Vancouver%20Inclusive%20Community%20Gardens_Lowcock.pdf

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