

# The meanings of community gardens

Urban agriculture has blossomed over the past 10 - 15 years. Community gardens are the subject of increasing volumes academic inquiry, and there are many fascinating political, social and ethical pluralities to investigate <sup>[1]</sup>. Community gardens can represent an alternative approach to food sourcing and social relations - a material critique of our globalised, industrialised food system - but not everyone sees their radical potential. Some argue that vegetable gardens enable communities to regain some control and power over their food supply and to remake the urban spaces around them <sup>[2, 3]</sup>. Others argue that gardens underwrite the retrenchment of the social safety net characteristic of contemporary urban political economies and do the groundwork for gentrifying the city <sup>[4]</sup>. My research looks at what people think they're doing when they do community gardening and considers what their gardening activities suggest they are practically doing.

The gardeners I work with expressed a range of motivations for joining community gardens in formal interviews. These include concerns about food security, food miles, agricultural practices, globalised agri-food systems, genetic modification and self-reliance. These are heavy burdens for the kale and tomatoes to bear. When we worked together in the garden, weeding, harvesting and casting an appraising eye over their neighbours' plots, the gardeners expressed more personal and intimate motivations. To help me sort through the various motivations, modes and materialities of community gardening, I've borrowed an idea from the late anthropologist Sidney Mintz, who examined power relations in food systems. He argued that our consumption choices and cultural practices have both outside and inside meanings <sup>[5]</sup>.

Outside meanings endeavour to explain the overarching constraints that define what food people have access to - and community gardens are usually established to produce food - while inside meanings illustrate how people accommodate new foods into their consumption practices by constructing cultural meanings around what they eat. Mintz, for example, looked at the way that the British came to have access to tea and sugar through colonialization - the outside meaning of tea and sugar - and described the cultural value that the nation gave these products as "inside meaning" <sup>[6]</sup>.

In adapting this concept for community gardens, outside meaning is those structural and tactical forces that determine the urban form within which people establish gardens and the social and economic relations that make community gardens possible, desirable or even necessary. Cities grow and intensify, but the way we live in them and what we ask from them has changed. Areas that were once hives of industry can lie silent while developers transform empty dockyards and harbourside grime into palaces of bourgeois consumption.

The outside meanings of gardens are easily perceived, but the inside meanings have taken longer to discern. Community gardeners often expressed concern about lost

generational knowledge and declining domestic competence. Changing patterns of employment and the globalisation of our food system mean that our ideas about who cooks, and with what and for whom no longer quite fit, suggesting that nostalgia for the simple, homely pleasures of veges in the garden and dinner in the oven haunts many gardens. We forget that those pleasures often came at the cost of a stultifying heteronormativity and strict gender roles that couldn't be sustained.

Issues of nutrition and healthy lifestyles recurred again and again in my discussions with gardeners. Even as our urban environments, family and social lives have changed, our bodies have changed too. Changing bodies offer vantage points to re-examine the discourses and institutions that shape the intimate, everyday practises of living. They also invite surveillance and intervention fuelled by a prevailing yet contentious assumption that our changing bodies reflect lifestyles that demonstrate a failure to *know* and *act* in ways that produce a body representative of good health [7, 8].

This approach to health is an inside meaning of community gardens that wasn't immediately obvious. It took the appearance of an unexpected plant - *nicotiana* - to bring these meanings into focus. *Nicotiana* is more commonly known as tobacco and is a plant that has much decorative appeal in a garden. The Royal Horticultural Society has as given tobacco its prestigious Award of Garden Merit, describing it as having "more than a touch of class, it makes an aristocratic statement at the back of a lightly shaded or sunny border" [9]. When it appears planted as a crop in neat lines between some brassicas and rows of earthed up potatoes in a community garden, it evoked a response from other gardeners that revealed the contours of the meaning they ascribed to their efforts. There are ways of conceiving tobacco cultivation as contributing to health<sup>[10]</sup>, but it requires a different lens. Our faith in the lifestyle doctrine shows us to be reflexive citizens who are disciplined to manage, monitor and correct our behaviours to produce good health outcomes. It renders some common garden plants as unwelcome, and those who cultivate them as unknowing, unaware, uncooperative.

Outside and inside meanings are, of course, ascribed to gardens by humans, who probably have the least influence over the garden of all the actors present. No matter how rigorous the organising committee or how tidy the raised beds, somehow the plants, birds, insects, weather and hidden microbes shape the garden into something wild and beyond our ken. They quietly do the work required to reproduce the garden while we fret about the work required to reproduce or reform our social and economic systems. Sometimes, the sheer exuberance of the plants and abundance of crops can challenge the discourses of scarcity and social or ecological stress that brought people into the community garden in the first place.

It is a particular set of humans that shape the meanings of gardens - adults. Meanings shape children's lives too, but Anita's paintings highlight the sensorial, embodied and affective ways in which children experience gardens and garden produce<sup>[11]</sup>. Her paintings capture sunlight and warmth, the damp fragrance of the soil and the brightness of foliage; children sit in the gardens, drawing with their backs propped against sun-warmed bricks, or test the weight of produce still hanging on a vine. These ways of knowing gardens and ascribing meaning sit within the power dynamics of social

governance perpetrated by adult gardeners and public policy. Children's garden experiences may do more to foster vibrant sympathies between them and their food than all our earnest attempts to parent them and to transmit our meanings, values and understandings. They remind us that, while gardening can be about food and nutrition, urban regeneration, household budgets and social discipline, they can also be about community, now and in the years to come.

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