

# Cultivating Community

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## *Building Cohesion and Forging Identities in New Haven's Community Gardens*

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the ways in which community gardeners value their participation in New Haven's community gardens and the processes through which they build community cohesion. Through eight ethnographic interviews and participant observation in six gardens I explore how gardeners value interaction with those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The stories of these gardeners indicate that community gardens build community cohesion by facilitating cross-cultural exchange, creating networks for knowledge and resource sharing, and establishing new identities for immigrant and transplant populations. In some cases, these processes cut across age groups, education backgrounds, and income levels. This research demonstrates that community gardens can serve as a vehicle for building community cohesion across cultural divides.

### **Introduction**

Community gardens are seen as symbols of community empowerment and positive change. The narrative of a neighborhood group transforming a blighted vacant lot into a productive, vibrant community garden is compelling and powerful. However, these anecdotal representations perpetuate vague impressions of community gardens as beneficial. A lack of evidence about the concrete benefits that community gardens provide leaves them powerless in the face of funding cuts and development (Twiss *et al.*, 2003; Lawson, 2005). Lawson calls this "The 'Gardens as Good' Dilemma" in her book *A City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America*. She says, "The assumption that gardens can garner support through their inherent goodness permits a lack of accountability about the good that gardens actually do." (Lawson, 2005).

Notable attempts to quantify, evaluate, and document the benefits of community gardens have been made over the past two decades or so. Research has shown that community gardens enhance the quality of life of gardeners by improving psychological, physical, and social wellbeing, improving diets, providing exercise opportunities, and saving food costs among others (Patel, 1991; Waliczek *et al.*, 1996; Armstrong, 2000; Holland, 2004; Wakefield *et al.*, 2007; Alaimo *et al.*, 2008). The USDA estimated that in 1993 the average community garden in Newark, NJ produced \$504 worth of produce (Patel, 1991). A survey of community gardens in upstate New York conducted in 1997 and 1998 concluded that 60% of urban community garden program coordinators consider "food source for low income households" a reason for taking part in

community gardens, 80% consider the “mental health benefits” of gardening, 87% “enjoy nature or open space,” 67% list “exercise,” as a motivation, and 93% agree that “fresh food is/tastes better” (Armstrong, 2000). Another survey of community gardens in the UK found that education, community development, and leisure were the three highest ranked purposes of community gardens (Holland, 2004). Although these studies are a step towards documenting the benefits of community gardens, they do so from the perspective of garden program coordinators, or other types of managers. This may or may not be different from the motivations of and benefits perceived by community gardeners themselves.

The monetary value of community garden produce production is quantifiable through measurement such as Patel’s, and the statistics gathered by Armstrong and Holland are collectible through surveys (Patel, 1991; Armstrong, 2000; Holland, 2004). However, these findings do not account for more complex, and perhaps more compelling, indicators such as community health, which is also a product of other political, social, economic, and environmental projects and systems in place (Lawson, 2005). To collect this type of data, we should utilize other methods that engage community gardeners and analyze their collective experience. By demonstrating the impacts of community gardens on their participants through ethnographic studies, we can substantiate claims of “gardens as good,” in more explicit terms, and explore their lasting contributions to building social cohesion and improving community health.

### **Evaluating Cohesion and Community Health**

A 2009 Denver study utilized interviews to examine the social processes described by active garden leaders and community gardeners (Teig *et al.*, 2009). Researchers found that gardeners identify social connections, reciprocity, mutual trust, collective decision-making, social norms, civic engagement, and community building as characteristics of community gardening. Through the processes of recruitment, volunteerism, leadership, and neighborhood organization, gardeners demonstrate social cohesion and collective efficacy.

A 2007 community-based qualitative research study used participant observation, focus groups, and interviews to explore the health impacts of community gardens in South-East Toronto (Wakefield *et al.*, 2007). Research questions were designed and interpreted by community gardeners themselves. The study concluded that participants perceived community gardens to improve access to food, improve nutrition, increase physical activity, improve mental and social health, and promote community cohesion. These researchers identified the development of “community networks and social support” through community gardens. Further, the gardens were perceived to promote cross-cultural communication, to “bring people out of isolation,” and to serve as a catalyst for discussing community issues (Wakefield *et al.*, 2007).

This work by Teig *et al.* and Wakefield *et al.* is a step towards documenting the complex benefits of community gardens, but more research needs to be done in order to

examine the processes through which community gardens facilitate social cohesion and cross-cultural exchange. My research explores the value of community gardens as perceived by the participants themselves. Through ethnographic study, including interviews, participant observation, and photography, aimed at evaluating and documenting the social and cultural processes of community gardens in New Haven, I examine the following question:

***How do participating members conceptualize the significance of their involvement in community gardens and their relationship to fellow gardeners?***

## **Methodology**

The New Haven Land Trust (also referred to as the Land Trust in this report) manages 50 community gardens in New Haven and estimates that over 600 people garden in these spaces. In the summer and fall of 2011, I captured eight interviews with gardeners who have worked, volunteered and/or gardened in one or more of the New Haven Land Trust-managed community gardens. I also conducted approximately 80 hours of participant observation in six of the gardens with a total of about 60 gardeners. Participant observation included taking part in organized workdays and garden parties and gardening alongside individual gardeners or small groups of gardeners. I engaged in informal conversations with participants and collected photographs of events when photographing was appropriate.

Informal interactions were valuable to this research, though interviews were my main source of data collection. While traditional ethnographic interviews are conducted by a researcher, interviews for this research were collected using a technique employed by StoryCorps, an independent non-profit American oral history project that records, archives, and shares interviews between two people who share an intimate relationship (StoryCorps, 2010). Using a semi-structured interview style I provided the interviewee with a prepared interview guide (see Appendix for a sample guide), though they were prompted to exercise freedom in choosing, phrasing, and improvising questions to capture compelling narratives. This style resembles community-based research in that it allowed participants to choose the questions that they considered most valuable to capturing stories and representing the value of the community gardens and the relationships developed among participants. The trade offs were variability contributed by the interviewer and the loss of research control over the direction of the interviews. However, I followed up with interviewees as necessary by phone or in person to acquire additional details and to collect responses to questions interviewers may have missed.

## **Meet the Gardeners**

Interviewees and other research participants included a range of gardeners from different socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. The elderly, immigrants, people of color, and those of lower socioeconomic means, as well as middle class and

white gardeners were represented. The current executive director of the New Haven Land Trust, a former employee, current and former volunteers, and participant community gardeners were interviewed. Chosen research participants garden with varying consistency and frequency in one or more of the New Haven Land Trust managed community gardens.

**Chris Randall** is a white man in his mid-30s and began as a gardener and volunteer in the summer of 2000. He had no previous gardening experience, but was recruited to help start a community garden by one of his neighbors. He became the coordinator of the garden, eventually joined the board of the Land Trust, and now serves as the Executive Director.

**Ida Wells** is an elderly African American woman who began gardening when she retired to New Haven about 20 years ago. She lives in a low-income housing complex and gardens with a dozen-or-so of her neighbors in raised beds provided by the land trust. This is the second community garden she has been actively involved with in New Haven. She has spent time visiting many of the other community gardens during visits organized by the Land Trust.

**Enza Maddaloni** is an Italian immigrant who came to the United States in 1971. She appears to be in her late 50s or early 60s. She gardened and volunteered for the Land Trust for 15 years before beginning paid work in about 2000. In 2007 she stopped paid work, but continues to volunteer.

**Debbie Evans** is a white woman in her late 50s who moved to New Haven from “the South.” She is a former community gardener who helped manage the one of the gardens for about 10 years and worked for the land trust for a summer in about 2001.

**Maria “Threese” Serana** is a 39 year-old Filipina immigrant who came to the United States in 2006. She gardens with her four year-old son in the garden that Chris Randall helped start.

**Sara Ohly** is an elderly white woman who is an advocate for refugees and hopes to work with the Land Trust to start up a program for refugee gardeners. She actively participates in a garden in her neighborhood and volunteers in other gardens as well.

**Bill Richo** is a white man in his late 20s who helped to revive one of the community gardens where participation had waned. He has only been gardening for a few years, but took on the position of garden coordinator and has since become a regional garden coordinator responsible for helping manage eight gardens.

**Jeff Panettiere** is a young white man in his early 20s who is employed part-time by a local housing shelter. He teaches shelter residents how to garden in the Land Trust’s gardens.

## Analysis

New Haven's community gardens are utilized by a variety of people from different cultural, educational, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds with a varying degree of gardening skills and abilities. In interviews, many of the gardeners acknowledge and appreciate a broadly defined notion of difference with phrases such as "It just gives me the chance to meet different folk from different walks of life," and "all a different gardens, all a different kind of people." More specifically, interviewees seemed to appreciate learning practical and cultural knowledge from and sharing resources with other gardeners.



## Practical Knowledge

In a city where the wealth of an ivy-league campus is starkly contrasted by poverty on bordering blocks, New Haven's community gardeners range in age and income and education level. Ida mentions this difference saying, "Although some of them might have *Yale* degrees...most of these folk are *down home folk*, who knew what it was, *maybe* to be a sharecropper." While some of the gardeners are "almost illiterate," as Ida mentions, their experience and practical knowledge are valued in the garden, where formal academic knowledge might not be quite as useful.

While some practical knowledge migrated to the Northeast along with former sharecroppers, as one gardener recounts, immigrants have also brought their farming and gardening experience to New Haven. Italian immigrant Enza credits her childhood spent on a farm in Italy, and Filipina immigrant Threese says of time spent in her family's urban garden and her grandparents' rural farm, "it's something that I really loved doing when I was a child."

Experienced gardeners, including transplants from other regions of the U.S. and immigrants from other countries, are known to take novice gardeners "under their wing," and teach them effective gardening techniques. Ida credits fellow gardeners with providing expertise that helped her develop from a novice to an adept gardener. Chris, in turn, acknowledges Ida for teaching others how to garden. Novice gardener Bill

heavily praises a neighbor for assisting him in the garden when he first began. While participating in the community gardens myself, I also became a part of this knowledge exchange, naturally sharing what I knew about gardening and soaking up what others seemed eager to teach me. In this sense, practical knowledge spreads and multiplies in New Haven's community gardens.



### Sharing and Cultural Exchange

Foodstuffs are exchanged in the form of seeds, produce, and homemade dishes both between community gardens and within the same garden. Experienced farmers growing at one garden share their “bumper crop” of greens with gardens that were not as productive. Ida says that “tomatoes and peppers and what not” are divided amongst people in her community garden; she goes as far as to say “it takes care of a lot of us folk.” In this case, although each gardener has their own plot, the yield is shared communally. In some instances, this sharing extends beyond the boundaries of the garden and to the surrounding neighborhood. During my visits to the gardens I was often offered part of the day's harvest. Bill was one such gardener who offered me lettuce during a visit, and during his interview he recounts sharing his produce with passersby who ask if they can have some. Other gardens donate their surpluses to organizations such as homeless shelters.

Prepared foods are also shared between gardeners. Ida recounts that “folk would make a little pot of whatever” to share during planned inter-garden visits. Additionally, garden parties serve as a means of coming together and sharing prepared foods in a potluck setting. Several gardeners expressed valuing gatherings as an opportunity to taste one another's traditional dishes and be exposed to other types of cuisine.

Italian immigrant Enza shared Italian *orzo* seeds,<sup>1</sup> grapevine cuttings, and fava beans with fellow gardeners and was also known to cook Italian dishes for garden parties. She

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as barley in the U.S. and used to make barley coffee, or *Caffe d'orzo* Grando, S., 2005. Food Uses of Barley. 12th Australian Barley Technical Symposium. International Center for Agriculture Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), Hobart, Tasmania.



was introduced to foodstuffs by other gardeners including collard greens and okra. Elderly African-American gardener Ida was introduced to callaloo by a Jamaican woman and shared collard green seedlings with 8 of the “plots” at her housing complex.<sup>2</sup> Gardeners did not communicate an explicit expectation of exchange; instead they demonstrated an unspoken practice of reciprocity.

Ida also recounts her introduction to cilantro by “a Spanish lady who doesn’t speak English.” This exchange of a foodstuff despite a language barrier is consistent with findings by Wakefield *et al.*: “Although there were language barriers among participants, communication was effectively maintained through hand gestures and exchanges of food” (Wakefield *et al.*, 2007).

These examples are evidence of an informal support network, built upon the values of sharing and exchange. The sharing of foodstuffs, including seeds, harvests, and prepared foods, contributes to a communal relationship between gardeners. In some cases, the benefits of sharing extend beyond the community gardens to those in the surrounding community. Additionally, the nature of cultural difference between gardeners facilitates cross-cultural exchange through the spread of foodstuffs. Interviewees value the opportunity to learn from and connect with people from different backgrounds. This is similar to the findings of Teig *et al.*: “Gardeners frequently described gardens as a place to connect across different cultural backgrounds...” (Teig *et al.*, 2009).



### Creating Identities: Bridges to the Past & Roots in the Present

The experiences of some gardeners indicate that the community gardens facilitate the construction of new identities. This includes re-establishing cultural practices in a new place and also being exposed to and adopting new practices. In some cases, these two seemingly dissimilar phenomena occur in tandem, allowing immigrants to maintain a connection to the past, while also establishing new roots in their present environment.

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<sup>2</sup> Callaloo is a leaf vegetable also known as amaranth.

Enza recalls how one garden used mostly by Latino immigrants in an elderly housing complex started out with only potatoes, beans, and maybe a few pepper plants. Later the garden grew to incorporate “a little bit of everything,” she says. This might suggest that the gardeners began to adopt new and unfamiliar cultivars alongside their traditional foodstuffs.

Filipina-American Threese gives a more personal account of her transformation in the garden. She grew up growing food in her family’s yard and spent summers on her grandparents’ farm. Upon moving to the U.S. she felt “uprooted,” “depressed,” and “isolated.” When Threese joined a community garden in her neighborhood, she began to connect to her neighbors. In addition to building relationships, she began cultivating foods from her childhood, such as Thai gourd, or what she calls “poor man’s beef.” The garden kind of bridged my home country,” Threese says. In agreement with Wakefield et al.’s finding that community gardens “bring people out of isolation,” the community garden enabled Threese to create a new identity as a Filipina-American by re-establishing the practice of gardening and while also connecting to her new community (Wakefield *et al.*, 2007).

“People seemed to wanna recreate the vegetables they had in their childhood,” Debbie says, referring to the immigrants she gardens with. This is evidenced in a particular garden where Puerto Rican families were attempting to grow foods they were accustomed to cultivating and eating in Puerto Rico. They soon found that the New England climate was not hospitable to avocado trees and other tropical plants. Meanwhile, the children were conducting research on the history of their neighborhood and discovered that Native Americans had once cultivated corn, beans, and squash there. Inhibited by their inability to fully re-establish dietary customs due to climactic conditions, but Informed by their children’s research, gardeners decided to try their hand at this trio of more suitable crops. This case illustrates that the young Puerto Rican gardeners came to understand the history of and connected to their new home through the garden and in a way were responsible for helping their families forge a new identity.





### Intergenerationality

Several of the New Haven Land Trust’s community gardens are dedicated to children, some host after school programs, and others are even located on elementary school campuses. The Land Trust makes a special effort to partner with youth organizations for volunteer workdays and other events. I participated in one such workday with children from New Haven Inner City Outings, an organization that seeks to provide opportunities for urban children to connect to nature. As a food and farm educator, I was asked to speak to these children about urban food systems and the importance of community gardens. The workday ended with an art project led by a community gardener.

According to Enza, formal summer programming served around 1500 kids one year when she was working for the land trust. When asked about her favorite experience working in the community gardens, Enza says, “The kids was the best part.” She recounts activities that she did with the kids, such as making a film to document the lifecycle of bread from seed to loaf. She reflects on kids’ cultivation of a circular pizza garden where a different topping – tomatoes, basil, oregano, etc. – grew in each slice. She even invited the children to her home to bake and eat pizza.

Threese brings her four-year-old son to the garden and views their visits as a bonding experience. For her, the garden is a venue to teach her son about “the chain of life,” and to share her belief “in the sacredness of life.” She sees gardening as a way to go beyond “teaching a child theoretically,” she says, and provide them with experiential learning opportunities.

Even gardens that do not formally incorporate children’s programming often welcome children, and interviewees speak highly of their experiences with children. Some gardens explicitly encourage intergenerational gardening, such as the “Grandparent’s Garden,” and Ida fondly recalls times when she’s been invited to events at a local high school and when school children have come to visit her gardens. She encourages the New Haven Land Trust to facilitate more of these visits and says, “I like the thought of intergenerational mixing when you’re doing stuff.” Other gardeners also expressed a

desire to see the New Haven Land Trust provide more opportunities for children in the community gardens and relayed positive interactions with children in the gardens.

## Conclusion

The majority of research devoted to community gardens has focused on health and economic benefits (Patel, 1991; Waliczek et al., 1996; Armstrong, 2000; Holland, 2004; Wakefield et al., 2007; Alaimo et al., 2008). While these were mentioned by some of New Haven's community gardeners, they were secondary to other benefits identified. This research demonstrates that New Haven's community gardeners value practical knowledge, resource sharing, cultural exchange, and intergenerationality. The examples provided establish food as a medium through which resources are shared, knowledge is transferred, and culture is exchanged between gardeners from different cultural, educational, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds with a varying degree of gardening skill and ability.

Participants are learning practical gardening knowledge from one another, sharing resources, and being exposed to different cultural foodstuffs. They come to value one another's contributions, as evidenced by their excitement: "it gives such a taste to anything you season it with!" and "the best spaghetti in the world!" The practice of and appreciation for sharing seeds, harvests, and prepared foods suggest that hospitality and dependability are fostered through the community gardens. There appears to be an inherent reciprocity that is not explicitly defined or stated, but rather loosely practiced. Excitement for learning from one another and the valuation of difference facilitates sharing and cross-cultural and intergenerational exchange, resulting in informal support networks.

"When you get to see that other people are doing it, other gardens, it gives like this idea of working for something bigger..." Threese says. "When you labor together you build a bond that goes beyond education and race," says Debbie. These quotes are evidence that New Haven gardeners are not simply growing food to supplement their diets, improve their health, or save money. Through community gardening, people are building relationships, connections, and community. For New Haven's immigrant populations community gardens facilitate the shaping of new identities, providing an the opportunity to grow culturally appropriate food, and connecting people to their community and to their new environment.

## Challenges and Next Steps

Community gardens in New Haven face an onslaught of challenges including limited access to water and land, contaminated soils, tenuous funding, and threats of development. The New Haven Land Trust owns only two of the 50 community garden properties it manages. Some are tenuously protected under 1 and 5-year lease agreements with the city, and others are not protected at all. Interviewees articulated that the human investment in beautifying abandoned lots often leads to the sale and development of these properties. Enza recounts arriving at a garden site one morning to

find it had been razed to make way for the construction of houses. On another occasion, a garden owned outright by the Land Trust was mistakenly bulldozed by the city. While this is a disappointing fate of many community gardens, it is unclear whether a community garden, a park, a housing complex, a house, or a business storefront is more beneficial to a neighborhood. Further, this question is dependent on many factors and cannot be generalized into a blanket prescription for land use.

A study of New York City community gardens indicates that property values increase an average of 2.3% within one year of a community garden being established on a neighboring property (Voicu and Been, 2008). This percentage more than doubles after five years of the garden being established and the average net tax benefit per garden over a 20-year period is \$1 million (Voicu and Been, 2008). This research indicates that community gardens might be profitable for city governments, but at whose expense? Do increased property taxes negate the cost savings community gardens secure for participants? Is it fair for community members who do not participate in the garden to shoulder the burden of increased property taxes?

The relationship between community gardens, community members, cities, non-profits, and other involved parties is a complicated one. More research needs to be done to inform decision-making and to help communities maximize their resources. This research of New Haven's community gardens demonstrates their potential to strengthen neighborhoods and build relationships across age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education level. While this research succeeds in evaluating and documenting the social and cultural benefits of community gardens in New Haven and helps substantiate the claim of "gardens as good," it does not postulate that gardens are the solution to all community problems, but that they can perhaps contribute to a more comprehensive strategy for building community cohesion.

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## Appendix: Sample Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this project! Your stories are incredibly important to us.

This interview guide is meant to facilitate an informal conversation. Feel free to stray from these questions and probe deeper to encourage your interview partner to share stories that you find important to the topics of food, health, gardening, cooking, eating, etc. You do not have to read these questions word for word. You know your partner better than we do, so feel free to phrase questions as you'd like.

Encourage your partner to tell an interesting story that you may have heard before, or a story that you've never heard but would like to. Also, please tell *your* stories. Your stories are equally important to this conversation!

We hope you will be relaxed and comfortable during the conversation. Your partner is free to decline to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable.

If you find your partner noisily fidgeting, please remind them that the microphone picks up these noises.

Now, sit back, relax, and enjoy this uninterrupted conversation time!

Interviewer: TBD

Interviewee: TBD

Can you tell me your name, age, the date, where we are, and your affiliation with the New Haven Land Trust?

[Interviewer— state your name, age, and affiliation with the New Haven Land Trust]

Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Where is your mom's family from?

Where is your dad's family from?

Did your parents or grandparents garden or farm?

If so, what did they grow?

What was your diet like when you lived in [country of origin]?

When did you immigrate to the US?



Did your diet and lifestyle change upon immigrating? If so, how?

What foods do you miss?

What was your first experience growing food?

Where do you garden now?

When did you first hear about the community gardens?

How and why did you start gardening there?

Do your friends and family garden with you?

If so, do you enjoy gardening with them? Why?

Is the garden valuable to you? If so, how?

Are you involved in other land conservation projects with the New Haven Land Trust beyond gardening?

In your opinion, how does the Land Trust support your community or neighborhood?

How would you describe the Land Trust's relationship to the community or neighborhood?

What function do community gardens serve for your community or neighborhood?

What impact has community gardening had on your community or neighborhood?

What impact has community gardening had on you?

Do you feel like community gardening has connected you to your community or neighbors?

Do you feel like you are a part of the local food movement?

Do you feel like you are a part of the sustainability movement?

Do you consider yourself an environmentalist?

Do you know if the community gardens benefit underserved populations such as immigrants, the elderly, children, etc. within your community? If so, how?

Do the gardens benefit immigrants? If so, in what ways?

What is your favorite thing about gardening?

What lessons has gardening taught you?

Do you have a favorite gardening memory?