

# Hixon Center for Urban Ecology Student Research Fellows

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

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#### Problem

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 (NHLT) 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. The human investment in beautifying abandoned lots often leads to the sale and development of these properties and a lack of understanding about the complex social and cultural benefits of community gardens leaves them powerless in the face of budget cuts. By demonstrating the impacts of community gardens on their participants through ethnographic studies, we can substantiate claims of "gardens as good," in explicit terms and explore their lasting contributions to building social cohesion and improving community health.

#### Background

The NHLT serves over 600 residents, supplementing diets for populations with little access to fresh produce, providing outdoor recreational opportunities, and enhancing quality of life. Some gardens have been bulldozed for commercial or residential



development. In order to protect community gardens we must better understand their value to the people they serve. Research has been done to account for indicators such as community health.

This research examines the processes through which community gardens facilitate social cohesion and cross-cultural exchange, by exploring the value of community gardens as perceived by the participants. Through interviews, participant observation, and photography, aimed at evaluating and documenting the social and cultural processes of community gardens in New Haven, I examine the ways in which participants conceptualize the significance of their involvement in community gardens and their relationship to fellow gardeners.

#### Methods

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. Interviews were collected using a technique employed by StoryCorps, an independent non-profit oral history

project that captures interviews between two people who share an intimate relationship. 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.

#### Discussion

Food is a medium through which resources are shared, practical knowledge is transferred, and culture is exchanged between gardeners from different educational,



socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds with a varying degree of gardening skill and ability. Participants are learning from one another, sharing resources, and being exposed to different cultural foodstuffs.

The practice of and appreciation for sharing seeds, harvests, and prepared foods suggest that hospitality and dependability are fostered through community gardens. There appears to be an inherent reciprocity that is not explicitly stated, but rather loosely practiced. The valuation of difference facilitates sharing and cross-cultural and intergenerational exchange, resulting in informal support networks.

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.