



Seeds, Soil, and Stories:

A pilot study of community gardening in Southeast Toronto

FINAL PROJECT REPORT

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Garlic Chives

Regent Park
Community Ministries

CAROLIN

*"Tell us what grows in your garden, tell us the story you know,
tell us about the seeds you have planted...
show us the FOOD YOU HAVE GROWN
What recipes do you follow?
How has the garden changed what you know?"*

Introduction

The above quotation is taken from a song that was performed at community events as part of a community-based research project investigating the health consequences (broadly defined) of community gardening. The song was part of a broader strategy to engage gardeners in the research process, and to encourage people to tell us about their gardening and how it made them feel.

This report is a final summary of the project.

Who We Are

This research project was a joint effort of researchers from the University of Toronto Centre for Urban Health Initiatives, Ryerson University Centre for Studies in Food Security, and FoodShare Toronto. The research team included (in alphabetical order):

Jennifer Reynolds

Jennifer Reynolds coordinates the Community Food Animators Project with FoodShare Toronto, whose goal is to improve access to affordable, culturally appropriate and healthy food in Toronto neighbourhoods along community development models. Formerly she coordinated the Education & Communications at FoodShare and worked on food security advocacy, research and education.

Ana Skinner

Ana Skinner recently completed her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Studies from York University. In her work with the UGROW team, she assisted with focus group and event planning, and helped with literature review. Ana is currently environmental program coordinator for the Laidlaw Foundation.

Carolyn Taron

Carolyn Taron is the community researcher with the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives. Her work with CUHI focused on the Urban Gardening Opportunities Workgroup project in which she played an integral role. In her work with the UGROW team she facilitated community engagement and conducted focus groups and interviews.

Sarah Wakefield

Sarah is an assistant professor in the University of Toronto Geography Department/Program in Planning, and is the Director of the Food and Health Research Interest Group of the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives (CUHI).

Fiona Yeudall

Fiona is an assistant professor in the School of Nutrition at Ryerson University, and the associate director of the Centre for Studies in Food Security, Ryerson University.

Together, we are the Urban Gardening Research Opportunities Workgroup (UGROW). We worked with representatives of community gardens and their sponsor organizations to develop and carry out this research project.

Background

This research project investigated community gardening in Southeast Toronto. Community gardens are increasingly becoming part of the urban fabric, in Canada and around the world. These gardens, often built on abandoned or otherwise underutilized land (Barnett, 1998; Hancock, 2001), are seen by community members and local service organizations as having a number of positive health benefits. These can include:

- improved access to food and better nutrition (Patel, 1991; Irvine et al, 1999; Dickenson et al, 2003);
- increased physical activity (Amstrong, 2000; Dickenson et al, 2003)
- improved mental health (Amstrong, 2000)
- improved security and safety in local communities (Ferris et al, 2001; Schmelzkopf, 1995);
- opportunities for education and job skills training, as well as for income generation (Fusco, 2001; Schmelzkopf, 2002; Holland 2004);
- increased social interaction, and an increased appreciation of social diversity (Hancock, 2001; Doyle and Krasny, 2003);
- improved local ecology and sustainability (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Handcock, 2001)

Overall, community gardens are thought to provide a variety of opportunities for local community development (Jamison, 1985; Kurtz, 2001).

Unfortunately, much of the evidence used to support community gardens is anecdotal. There are few studies of community gardening in the literature. Of those that do exist, few explicitly focus on health benefits or have looked at Canadian community gardens. This lack of evidence can limit the ability of community gardeners and garden advocates to make their case effectively to local planners and decision-makers. This ability is central to the development and continuation of community gardens, as they are generally dependent on some form of government support (ranging from assistance in gaining access to land to appropriate zoning, to providing direct support in the form of compost, tools, and even administrative assistance).

In addition, a surprisingly small number of published studies actually involved talking with community gardeners themselves about what they thought about their own community gardening. This was true despite local anecdotal evidence that gardeners had many experiences to share about the positive aspects of community gardening, as well as a few concerns or questions that, if answered, might help their gardens to continue to thrive. Also, few of the existing studies involved gardeners from such diverse cultural backgrounds as is common within the gardens of Southeast Toronto.

In order to fill these gaps in knowledge, and to provide local gardeners with the information they need to persuade local decision-makers, **this study sought to identify the key health benefits of community gardening, as well as potential challenges.** This project used an approach called community-based research. Community based research (or CBR) can be defined as:

...research that is conducted by, with or for communities. (Sclove et al, 1998)

...research with a substantial level of community participation for the purposes of community improvement and social change. (Loka Institute, 2002)

This approach, also called “community-based participatory research” (CBPR), is about including the community in research. Part of inclusion is making research more accessible to non-academics; another part is conducting research that helps to meet the needs of communities *as they define them*. This project was an attempt to allow community members to co-identify future research priorities, while at the same time providing information about community gardening that could be useful to the gardeners themselves. We have also tried hard to make this research project an opportunity for ‘learning exchange’, in which we give back to the community through seminars and other events on topics that interest them.

Research Methods (What We Did)

Preliminary Work

This research project used three primary methods to collect information – participant observation, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. To begin the study, an initial list of gardens in the study area was generated from FoodShare’s existing database on community gardens in the city; this was supplemented by web searches. The catchment area was limited to Southeast Toronto communities (south of Bloor Street and East of Yonge Street). Four additional gardens were identified in the community once field work began. In total, 15 gardens in the area were identified. This list does not include one of the community gardens we had initially hoped to include in the research project (Francis Beavis Manor). This garden was not included because, after an initial meeting, our attempts to contact the garden coordinator were unsuccessful. See Table 1 for a description of each garden included in the study.

During the formative stages of the research, we held a focus group with the community garden coordinators from three of the southeast Toronto gardens. A focus group is a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Kreuger, 1988). The garden coordinators helped us to refine our initial ideas, and also suggested topics for learning exchanges (for more about these exchanges, please see the Table 2). Establishing a rapport with the coordinators of the garden projects was essential to building relationships with the garden participants. All of the garden coordinators and community workers we approached (some of whom we went to after the initial focus group) shared their time, insights and expertise generously. Their passion and caring for their community, the gardens and the gardeners was evident. We were able to understand the unique needs and challenges of the gardens from the perspective of the coordinators and gain their trust, which in turn made it possible to meet and speak with the gardeners themselves, whose voices we wanted to be sure to include.

In order to introduce ourselves to gardeners, we created a colourful poster (see Figure 1) and displayed it in the gardens. On it we explained the purpose of the pilot study and encouraged gardeners to share their experiences in the garden. Some participants asked for copies to share

with their family and friends. The illustrations on the posters were sometimes a starting point for further discussion with gardeners, and their posting often served as the starting point for the participant observation component of the research.



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Photo Credit: Carolin Taron

Participant Observation

Participant observation is the process of paying attention to the activities of the community or group under study – in this case, gardeners – for research purposes, while at the same time being part of the activities that the community is engaged in. In our case, this took the form of helping out while visiting Southeast Toronto gardens during the 2004 growing season. This observation helped us to develop a picture of the ‘social life’ of each garden, and also served as a tool to involve gardeners in other components of the research. Field work was conducted by the community researcher who visited the gardens almost daily and became engaged in the community life around the gardens. At the invitation of garden coordinators, the researchers were able to attend garden meetings, community barbeques, harvest events, and canning and composting workshops. They could be considered ‘researcher-participants’ (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998), because they did not have a plot in each garden. While having actual plots in the garden would have allowed the researchers to engage more fully in the gardens, this was not feasible given the number of gardens being studied. In addition, this would have taken plots away from local gardeners, which was neither administratively possible (due to the waiting lists for plots in most gardens), nor kept with the values of the research. The researchers’ participation therefore took the form of planting seeds, washing dishes, carrying water, and shovelling dirt, while in the process learning about people’s experiences in the gardens and in the community. Field notes (recorded throughout the research process) were used to collect data.

Focus Groups

This participant observation was complemented by focus groups. As mentioned earlier, a focus group is a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Kreuger, 1988).

Participant observation activities and the display of posters throughout the gardens inspired focus group participants to become involved in the research project. Involvement was simultaneously facilitated by garden coordinators, who often helped to identify and contact participants. Community engagement was essential to this process. Research team members participated in community events, and we were able to include a brief introduction to the UGROW project in the community newsletter for the Regent Park gardeners. Involving participants was time consuming and challenging – for example, three visits to a garden site might be required before actually meeting a gardener there. UGROW team members were also faced with overcoming the challenges of language barriers and resistance to conventional academic research.

Focus groups were held at different locations and times to accommodate the needs and preferences of participants. One of the focus groups was on a weekend morning outside in the garden; other focus groups were in the evenings, or on weekend afternoons after or before community meetings. Each focus group required at least a week and more often a month of planning and confirming the time, meeting room location, translation or childcare, and involvement of participants. In total, ten focus groups were held, with the number of participants in each group ranging from 3 to 9. Focus groups were conducted for each community garden plot wherever possible. Unfortunately, circumstantial and organizational restrictions inhibited the use of focus groups for a few of the plots.

Melinda Lewis suggests that creating a place where people can feel comfortable is a central component of focus group research:

“The key element here is the involvement of people where their disclosures are encouraged in a nurturing environment. It taps into human tendencies where attitudes and perceptions are developed through interaction with other people” (Lewis, 2000).

In an effort to create a nurturing environment for every focus group and interview, we provided refreshments – snacks were often homemade, and using garden produce or ‘garden themes’ where possible – and spaces were made more ‘homey’ by using non-disposable dishes and cutlery and by displaying fresh flowers. However, many of the focus groups were held in community rooms amidst numerous distractions. In addition, most of the participants were from diverse cultural backgrounds, and English was often a second language. These constraints often made facilitating dialogues challenging.

In the focus group, discussions were structured by a set of questions related to the role of community gardening in people’s lives, as well as the possible roles that research could play (see Table 3 for questions). Each focus group lasted approximately 1 to 2 hours. Overall, the focus groups seemed to achieve their intended aim of providing an open and supportive arena for expressing opinions. Although many of the participants were initially hesitant to sign consent forms (needed for ethics review) or speak, most of initial awkwardness gave way to a bubbling enthusiasm. Many participants who were shy at the beginning and thought that they had ‘nothing to say’ opened up and told their stories. After the focus groups participants spoke of what they had learned in the process of listening to each other and about the ideas presented by the group.

In-Depth Interviews

In some cases, in-depth interviews – that is, carefully planned and facilitated one-on-one discussions – were conducted. In-depth interviews were used in cases where it was not feasible (due to organizational or circumstantial restrictions) to conduct focus groups. One-on-one interviews were also offered as an alternative option to encourage participation from people who may feel uncomfortable in a group setting. Interviews often took place within the community gardens and in other community common space as it was available. Interviews were guided by the same questions as the focus groups. They lasted between ½ hour and 1 hour.

Data Analysis

Focus groups (and interviews when possible) were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional data transcriber and supplemented by the participant observation field notes. These transcripts formed the heart of the data for analysis.

The focus group transcripts were analysed through thematic coding. This involved having the research team read through each transcript line-by-line to identify important points or ‘themes’ (see Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Members of the team developed a list of themes individually. Individual lists were then used to generate a coherent, consistent set of themes through group discussion. This master list was then used to guide the organization and interpretation of results.

Preliminary results were communicated to research participants at a number of community events to help assess the credibility of the researcher’s interpretations of participants’ experiences (i.e. member-checking – Baxter and Eyles, 1997; these activities are described in more detail in the ‘Dissemination of Results’ section).

It should be noted that in all cases, the sample size was small – approximately 55 people participated in focus groups, and 13 in interviews. These numbers are not large enough to allow us to make generalizations about how ALL gardeners, even within the study area, would respond when asked the same questions. Similarly, there were lots of interactions at the gardens that we did NOT see. The purpose of this research is not to be able to say what all Southeast Toronto gardeners do or think – instead, the research is intended as a window into the experiences of the *particular* gardeners that we spoke with and observed. At the same time, it is hoped that many of the themes and issues we identify will resonate with other gardeners – and in fact, our research dissemination and member-checking activities suggest that this is the case, and serve as a catalyst for further discussion and research.



Leslie St. Allotment Gardens

Photo Credit: Carolin Taron

Findings

This section begins with an overall summary of the gardens and what we saw there. This is not a description of any garden in particular, but rather a generalized amalgamation of all the gardens, presented as a kind of 'ideal type'. Following this description, the results of the research are grouped into three categories – benefits of community gardening, problems and challenges faced, and areas where greater support is needed to allow the gardens to flourish. These results are illustrated with direct quotes from the focus groups and interviews, as well as observations of the gardens. Quotes from the focus groups reflect the diversity of research participants, including the fact that English was a second language to many. We have retained the original wording of these quotes, since they represent an important opportunity for participants to speak 'for themselves' in their own words, and because they are often powerful and moving expressions of ideas and feelings.

The Community Gardens of Southeast Toronto

The community gardens identified in this research were extremely diverse. They greatly varied in size (from a large field to a narrow space between a building and a sidewalk) and in organization (from allotment gardens with individual plots, to communally worked gardens and even gardens that offer employment). In addition, the gardens varied tremendously in terms of the cultural backgrounds of participants, although most gardens were internally diverse (that is, they had gardeners from a variety of backgrounds working together within one garden).

The gardens themselves were often quite beautiful. Despite the small size of most plots (approximately 8x10 feet), there were often large numbers of different kinds of vegetables grown within one plot. Some plots were more utilitarian, with plants rigorously trained and controlled for maximum productivity. Others were more sprawling, and many left some room for flowers as well as vegetables. Overall, the gardens conveyed a sense of lushness and abundance.

In many cases, the gardens were empty for large parts of the day (but were often the subject of passer-by interest). The gardens were most active in the evenings, after most people had finished work but before the sun had set. Many gardeners were women, but men and children were also often in attendance, working their own plots or (in the case of the children in particular) serving as helpers. Children would often play alongside gardeners as they worked, occasionally helping with tasks like watering. Regular tasks involved some planting, weeding, watering, and of course harvesting. Many people seemed to visit their garden and gather food for dinner there, as others might shop at a local grocery store.

Laughter and conversations emanated from the gardens. Each garden seemed like a village unto itself, a place where people gathered and socialized. Caring for one's own plot or sharing several plots within a family seemed to be significant source of pride. Although there were language barriers among participants, hand gestures and samplings of mint or berries brought out smiles and exclamations that did not require translation.

Community gardens that were situated near the homes of the gardeners involved seemed to be used more regularly and consistently than those in areas not immediately adjacent the housing of participants.

Overall, there seemed to be a high level of interest in community gardens from passers-by. A frequent question from non-gardening community members was, "Where can I find a plot?" "Can

you help me find one?” This interest within the Southeast Toronto community was not matched by availability – most gardens had waiting lists for plots.

This general description is intended to give the reader some insight into the nature of the community gardens of Southeast Toronto. The sections that follow provide insight into the experiences of the gardeners themselves, as expressed in the focus groups and interviews. The benefits of community gardening are noted first, followed by challenges and areas in need of support.

Benefits of Community Gardening

The first set of benefits discussed here relate to how gardens were seen to improve the physical health of participants. Important themes here include better access to food (an issue of central importance to health for people with low incomes), improved nutrition, increased physical activity, and improved mental health. One of the benefits of community gardening mentioned by the gardeners was, not surprisingly, better access to fresh wholesome food. Most of the participants spoke of the benefit of food access and cost saving in some way. In some cases, this ability to substitute garden-grown produce for store-bought foods was seen to make a significant difference in household purchasing:

Thanks God ... until October I've not bought from No Frills or another shop.

For most gardeners, the gardens played a supplementary role, filling gaps in their diet, particularly for fresh food and for food that was traditional in the gardener's culture or place of origin. For many of the gardeners, being able to grow and eat culturally appropriate foods was very important:

We were part of a different country... our taste is related to our produce [I grow] our country's spinach in my garden.

Although some of these unique and culturally appropriate foods were available in some of the local grocery shops, participants commented that the prices of these foods were often exorbitantly high and they were not fresh. Indeed, freshness of the produce from the garden was also seen as a benefit:

Things that we grow, it's fresh...

Children were mentioned as particularly benefiting from the access to fresh produce and this was considered very important:

Oh my children, they love it when they, when I bring it from planting, "Oh Mom, is that from the garden, is it from the garden?" They are so excited about it you know.

This quote illustrates not only the appeal of the food, but also the role that it plays in people's lives. Another commonly mentioned benefit of the community gardens was their contribution to healthy living, in the form of better nutrition and increased exercise. Participants spoke of eating more vegetables because of their community garden involvement:

I've switched to having more vegetables.

This is an important contribution to better nutrition, given that higher consumption of vegetables and fruits are known to promote health and prevent disease and may be harder to attain for people with

limited incomes (Power, 2005). In addition, for the majority of participants, growing food organically in the gardens was considered important. In some cases there was an agreement in place to grow without pesticides. In this context, the gardeners are reducing their exposure to pesticide residues, which may also improve their long-term health. Gardeners also said that their gardening helped keep them physically (and mentally) active:

It's a form of exercise, relaxation...getting away...from the TV, uh...a way to produce something with your hands... it's nice to see something grow that you started.

The garden and me, we're like old friends. I just like to plant, to go and make myself useful and busy. In here [touching chest], that's what I need.

Again, this could be an important health benefit for participants. For some, especially the elderly, the exercise and activity – both physical and mental – the garden offered was most essential. The above quotes also begin to illustrate how gardening is seen as an activity that impacts a gardener's sense of well-being. This sense that gardening contributed to mental health was voiced repeatedly in both the interviews and focus groups:

...sometimes when you are stressed out... when you go to the garden, you feel different.

It helps you hold onto life.

The emotional and stress relieving benefits of community gardening were highly valued by almost all of the participants. One component of this feeling of improved mental health seemed to be that participants found the opportunity to interact with nature relaxing and calming. Participants appreciated “[the] opportunity to get out into nature even though I live in the city”. The community gardens offered spaces of retreat within densely populated neighbourhoods.

Community Health Benefits

The second set of benefits discussed here relates to the positive impact that community gardening is seen to have on ‘community health’. That is, community gardens are seen to benefit the community as a whole, by improving relationships among people, by increasing community pride, and in some cases by serving as an impetus for broader community improvement and mobilization.

At an individual level, gardeners expressed the pride generated from their garden involvement. For most participants, sharing produce from what they had grown was very satisfying and rewarding:

I give away tomato... I enjoy it because when I reap, my friends come and share ...they give me warm reception.

This opportunity to share something they had produced was of great importance, particularly among people with low incomes. For many, gardening was an empowering experience and a way of having something in their life ‘work out’. This feeling could be enhanced by garden-based programming, which occurred in many of the gardens, and which might take the form of job training or continuing education opportunities. As one respondent noted, these programs could help to build self-esteem through skills development.

...the program here, like, helps us all to develop skills that we never thought we had.

This individual sense of pride emerging from the gardening and associated programs was often extended to the wider community as well:

...it gives everybody a chance to better themselves, and a better community.

The community gardens were also thought to increase attachment to the community:

...the gardening is such a great thing, it encourages love for the area, love for the city.

...everyone in the community kind of benefits too...it's a nice green space now, where it was just a rubble pile and leaves for a long time, and so it makes the whole community look nicer.

As expressed in the second quote, the community gardens were seen not only as enhancing people's feelings, but also as enhancing the physical features of the community to its broader benefit.

The gardens were also seen by gardeners as a place for positive social interaction. As one gardener noted, the garden is a place where "*people come together... it breaks isolation*". This is a particularly important benefit of community gardening in a community where social exclusion and marginalization are pervasive problems. Again, the importance of 'sharing' comes across as a prevalent aspect of community garden culture:

We share ideas, we share ...tools, vegetables we share, the foods, we share even the knowledge, cultures, through gardening.

As is noted above, sharing not only vegetables and tools, but also ideas, particularly across cultures and other social differences was seen as a particular potent form of social engagement occurring within the gardens:

...it was great...we got together with other neighbours, neighbour gardeners and talk about fruits and vegetables and how to cook.

...we can know each other, and we can share everything like a culture, like a food... food is a language...and the only thing that I know to meet these people is to do this gardening.

... we all learn from each from each other, as gardeners, everyone there is, we're out there with somebody, and you can share stories or, or talk to each other, that's something that we can share.

For many gardeners, the gardens served as meeting places. In some cases, this could lead to broader discussions about other, non-garden-related issues of importance to the community:

In the process of organizing this garden in the community, it helps people, it helps us to organize other programmes that will be able to help us encourage each other...

This suggests that community gardens can be important sites for broader involvement in community development activities.

Overall, the gardens were seen as highly beneficial to the gardeners. These benefits were often expressed as a strong emotional attachment to the gardens themselves. These quotes were typical:

Never say that I don't need this here garden. Because to me, I need my garden as much as I need my sleep.

Yeah, so like having something like this is like this is like an oasis, and it is, it is so, uh, it is so important to have it, to keep it, it's so invaluable that I could almost say, if I, if I didn't have this garden, I would die.

The expression of such strong feelings about the gardens highlights their importance to the gardeners who use them. The fact that there are significant waiting lists for many of the gardens, and that many passers-by enquire about the gardens and how to get involved, suggests that there is a larger population, beyond the current gardeners, who also see their value, even without being able to fully participate.

Concerns and Challenges

The gardeners also identified a number of issues that they perceived as challenges. The primary concern or issue raised was that of insecure tenure. As all of the gardens were located on sites that were not directly owned by the gardeners themselves, many gardeners had concerns about whether or not their access to the land would be continued over time. For almost all of the community garden projects, the risk of garden loss due to insecure tenure was a very real concern. In the Regent Park area of Southeast Toronto, the future of the gardens has become a real concern due to the redevelopment of the area that has recently begun. For example, residents commented:

They say yes, we're going to have gardens but they're not in the plans.

We can't think about future because they're going to break down the area...

This is a source of consternation to gardeners, particularly given the strong sense of attachment that they feel to the gardens. The following quote illustrates the impact of insecure tenure in the face of redevelopment expressed by many residents:

...I'm worried – when's the condo going to come? Because they keep on talking about development, and then my brain starts to race. How can I get another garden? Where can I get it?

Overall, gardeners felt that the gardens and their needs were not appreciated or considered by decision makers. Gardeners felt that there was a lack of awareness about the gardens, and that this was accompanied by a lack of political will to assist the gardens:

They have no, they obviously don't see, City Council doesn't see us as something as important, you know, health wise, community wise... like it's certainly a lot cheaper than running a swimming pool, on what an acre of land, probably half an acre.

The gardeners saw this as reflecting a general lack of awareness or appreciation of the gardens. In their minds, this lack of appreciation was expressed through problems with litter and vandalism. Garbage, vandalism, and theft were common concerns throughout the community gardens. Additionally, some gardeners expressed concerns about personal safety while in the gardens.

Uh...and also I'd heard the rumour of as a woman that there's somebody stalking people or attacking people in community gardens, so I, I, I don't feel particularly unsafe, I usually go out there before dark. That kind of concerns me about that, it's happening in other gardens around the city.

At the same time, other participants also spoke of feeling particularly safe within the community gardens, as the following quotes illustrate:

You come here, you've got a fence, nobody gets in without a key, you're safe in here.

The kids in here are safe.

Of course, this feeling of safety was to a certain extent dependent on the garden's physical infrastructure (e.g., whether it is fenced), as well as on participants' overall sense of the dangerousness of the community outside the garden's boundaries.

Gardeners were also concerned about the impacts of environmental quality on the quality of their produce, and in turn on their health. For many of the participants, growing in contaminated soil was the most significant risk associated with community gardening:

What I would like to do is to get the soil tested. I'm kind of not sure about is the soil quality. I know some topsoil was added but I don't know how healthy it is.

Air pollution was also mentioned as a possible source of contamination:

In any city the air pollution is bad and you can expect something to be getting into anything you grow, so that is one of the problems with vegetables growing in the city.

In this way, community gardeners see an intimate connection between the quality of local (urban) environments and risks to their health, in ways that non-growers may fail to recognize. Interestingly, preliminary testing conducted in a related project suggest that city-grown vegetables from one downtown garden were no more contaminated than their supermarket counterparts (Diamond, 2005) – however, urban soils can be contaminated from past land uses, and so should be tested prior to garden development in order to ensure that no contaminants are present at the garden site. In most of the gardens studied, soil tests had been conducted early in the development of the gardens, and steps were taken to mitigate the site if necessary.



220 Oak St. Community Garden Photo Credit: Dennis Black

Ways to Make Southeast Toronto's Community Gardens Better

The gardeners we spoke with mentioned a number of ways that their community gardens could be better supported, to increase the health benefits of the gardens and to overcome some of the challenges that are being faced. One common theme was the desire for more garden-based learning opportunities:

It would be great to learn, to get some tips, like what things to plant that will do well there, and what, you know, what to plant together so if you had somebody that could come in that was an expert or knew a lot about planting and how to, make the best out of the soil that we have and figure out if there's something that needs to be added to the soil to make things grow better, and about composting, we can learn more about compost to enrich the soil.

Existing educational programs within the community gardens were highly valued and encouraged. Gardeners had ideas for additional programming which were voiced by a number of participants and interest was expressed in programs that would allow and encourage community members to stay involved in community gardening over the long winter months. Participants also spoke about the importance of involving the elderly, youth, and youth at risk in community gardening:



Growing Together
Photo Credit: Carolin Taron

Yeah, I think Community Gardening will help them learn about the nature, and it will help them to uh, actually to be involved with their natural activities and then get a relationship, we can involve young kids to practice the leadership skill. And they, and they'll feel, they'll think that there's something that they can grow something from their effort and they'll feel confident.

I think we can involve...youth groups – then the next generation, youth generation will, will make more use of the young groups will be involved in the gardening and they love it.

And you could hook one granny or grandpa with an at risk junior, you know, kid. So they get a 20X20 lot and he's got to do the hard work and she does the teaching and the fine stuff and the kid winds up with a skill. There's, there's a lot of older people? And you know, there's more and more coming because of the baby boomers, and the Government is looking for all kinds of ways to house these older people through day programs. What the heck is wrong with them starting up a granny garden place? You know?

...maybe something that we really need to work at is maybe to give the kids some focus and starting some sort of a community garden, somewhere in the community, meant for kids who are troubled and who have nothing to do after school.



Christian Resource Centre
Photo Credit: Carolin Taron

In many cases – and as in some of the quotes above – involving youth and the elderly was seen as something that could be done within one program, in order to increase community cohesion.

Participants were also interested in more opportunities to meet other community gardeners and learn about other community projects.

I have one [an idea]. If they did a website, would be great, so with all of the gardens listed, not just in the City of Toronto, but in all the suburbs around and then put on the website all of the various uh... gardening events, and plant sales and tool donations or anything to do with uh... gardening, or people, say people that would like to have a day visit to a garden.

My idea is that we can form a cooperative of gardeners.

I want to know about how we can be connected with other organizations.

Interestingly, few of the gardeners we spoke with seemed aware of the existing community garden networks in the city, which suggests that these organizations have failed to engage with this particular segment of the gardening population.

The gardeners were also aware that better support for the gardens, in terms of direct funding and in-kind support for resources and infrastructure, were fundamental to the operations of the gardens, but this was often lacking. The following quotes capture some of these concerns:

What is important here is the funding... Without money ideas don't work. We need funding.

I think many people are in want of seeds.

...gardening implements...we don't have a lot, we have one, we use it and you find it in the process of using one implement, it brings confusion, it brings problems, we, people drag in, like the water pipe from your own portion of garden through my own, you find out... we need lots of bins around us to be able to compost... yeah some of the stuffs we put together to get good manure or good soil together to plant in subsequent sessions. So that is just uh we need more education, we money, we need assistance to help us run the garden.

...most of us, we don't have a lot of money. So we need as much assistance as we can. It seems like a lot of work, to get any kind of assistance? ... We need more money to put into these community gardens, because this is a way of promoting a healthy society.

As the above quotes suggest, additional cash resources to support garden activities would be much appreciated by gardeners. Many of the gardens' most pressing needs are for improved infrastructure. In some cases, the infrastructure lacking is fairly basic (such as better access to water, and more and better garden tools). Support in terms of coordination is also essential. In other cases, the gardeners' wish lists were more substantial, including greenhouses and community kitchens. In all cases, the gardens' ability to function and to promote community development was seen as hampered by limited access to resources. This was exacerbated by the low incomes of many gardeners, who found it very difficult to commit any of their own financial resources to the garden or even to their own gardening activities.

During the focus groups, participants also spoke about wanting to have the community gardens recognized and valued by the greater community. This connected to concerns, described earlier in the report, that important community decision-makers (such as the municipal government and key institutional actors) were not aware of the gardens and their importance to local people. In particular, participants felt that the number of community gardens in the area should be increased, so that more people had more opportunities to garden locally:

Well, it's so ridiculous, but I read an article about how many allotments they have in Montreal, and it's a much smaller city than Toronto, and they have three times the number of allotments that we have overall, for all of Toronto.

We need to start savouring all these little bits and pieces of land that we have and that we can grow and enjoy what we grow. So that I think is very, very important, and I think it's this project for me.

I just wish we had more spaces to grow.

Given the long waiting lists for many of the gardens, finding more sites and securing resources to develop and maintain gardens there would help to meet the needs of both the gardeners we spoke with in this research and those waiting for plots.

Focus group participants spoke of their hope that this research would help increase the awareness of community gardening. In the words of one of the participants at the end of a focus group “...*this is important. MAKE IT WORK FOR US*”. Interest was expressed in further research as well. Topics of interest included water conservation practices, how plants can replenish soil and taste differences between vegetables from the garden versus from the supermarket. Research involving community gardens within social housing and the effects of community gardens within the community were also considered worthwhile, as was how community gardening involvement might affect crime or youth at risk. Overall, participants were interested in research that could benefit gardens and gardeners.

Conclusions

This study of community gardens highlighted the important role that community gardens play in the lives of gardeners, and how they enhance the health and well-being of gardeners and the broader community. The tapes of the focus groups and interviews contained a great deal of laughter and enthusiasm, illustrating the importance of the gardens to well-being in a way that is difficult to capture in words.

An overarching finding of the focus groups, interviews, and participant observation was that 'community gardens matter'. Growing one's own fresh food was not only seen as cost effective, but was also a way to access culturally appropriate foods. Community gardens were seen by gardeners as contributing to improved nutrition among them and their families. In addition, the opportunity for physical activity that gardening presented was seen as beneficial to health, especially for the elderly. For many, being part of a community garden was extremely stress-relieving, and was thought to contribute to improved mental health.

Community building and social support were developed through the gardens. **The gardens were seen by many as a place where communication with people from other cultures could begin, using food and shared experience as a starting point for understanding.** This was seen as a way of helping to bring people out of isolation, serving as a starting point for broader discussions of community issues.

Challenges faced by community gardens were also raised. Insecure tenure is a prominent concern for gardeners, and this issue is becoming more pressing in the Southeast Toronto area with the redevelopment of the Regent Park housing estate. The lack of support for community gardens from decision-makers, and the lack of resources (financial and otherwise) available to the community gardeners were also key issues that need to be addressed in order for Southeast Toronto's community gardens to thrive.

This report is one part of a broader attempt to return the results of this research to the community, and to highlight to a wider audience the importance of community gardens as a mechanism for promoting urban health (see Table 4 for a list of other research distribution activities). It is our hope that this research will serve as a catalyst for the maintenance of existing community gardens and the creation of new ones, to the greater benefit of the citizens of Toronto.



Christian Resource Centre

Photo Credit: Carolin Taron

Thank you to all of our participants!

Appendix

Figure 1: UGROW Garden Poster

Table 1: Description of gardens included in study

Table 2: Event listing

Table 3: Focus group questions

Table 4: Research dissemination

References

Figure 1: UGROW Garden Poster



U GROW



GARDEN STUDY



GARDENING can be a great way to eat more healthy food, get a little exercise, and relieve stress. Working in a community garden can also be a chance to get to know your neighbours. Community gardening can also have other effects on the health of people and their neighbourhoods, which we would like to know more about.

Researchers from University of Toronto and Ryerson University are working with Foodshare Toronto on a pilot study to LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW COMMUNITY GARDENS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SOUTHEAST TORONTO.

WE'D LOVE TO MEET YOU! and talk to everyone involved in the garden. We'll be visiting your garden soon or you can contact us at: The Centre For Urban Health Initiatives email: anana@yorku.ca at UofT (416) 978-7223

tell us what grows in your garden

Table 1: Description of gardens included in study*

<p>Name of Garden: Ashbridge EcoCommunity Garden Location: Dundas/Coxwell Number of Plots: 32 plots (one plot is used to grow food for local food bank)</p> <p>Description: This garden is a community based initiative started and maintained by residents with support from East End Community Health Centre and some funding from local businesses. The gardeners followed the Foodshare model from 'How To Start A Community Garden. Regular meetings are held. There is a waiting list.</p>
<p>Name of Garden: Christian Resource Centre, Garden 1 Location: 40 Oak St. Number of Plots: 28</p> <p>Name of Garden: Christian Resource Centre, Garden 2 Location: 184 River Number of Plots: 24</p> <p>Name of Garden: Christian Resource Centre, Garden 3 Location: 295 Gerrard Number of Plots: 24</p> <p>Description: These three gardens are located around the Toronto Christian Resource Centre. They are gardened by families and individuals from over 40 different cultural backgrounds living in Regent Park. Monthly meetings (during growing season) are coordinated by CRC. There is a waiting list.</p>
<p>Name of Garden: Growing Together Location: 220 Wellsley Number of Plots: 33 plots, 80 households involved in balcony gardening</p> <p>Description: This garden is located between 3 highrise buildings in St. Jamestown and the highly coveted plots are gardened by residents. One plot is gardened communally by Growing Together which is staffed by one part-time coordinator. There is also a Balcony Gardening Project involving a series of workshops relating to food growing in containers. Attendance for these workshops is high and many of the participants are recent immigrants from diverse cultural backgrounds. The community garden has a long waiting list. Funding is insecure.</p>
<p>Name of Garden: Miziwe Biik Location: Gerrard/ Sherbourne Number of Plots: N/A; Raised beds and barrels containing native plants , edible greens, and some vegetables surround the building.</p> <p>Description: This garden was recently initiated by Evergreen Foundation. A garden coordinator from within the native community is hired for one growing season. Participants attend garden related events and community bbqs.</p>

Name of Garden: **Moss Park**

Location: Sherbourne/Shuter

Number of Plots: 26

Description: This garden was started by numerous organizations including the Fred Victor Centre, Evergreen Foundation, and John Innes Community Centre. Different community groups and individuals have plots in the garden including individuals, school groups, seniors, and organizations including Fred Victor Centre.

Name of Garden: **Mustard Seed**

Location: Queen/Broadview

Number of Plots: 5

The garden is gardened by residents from the Fontbonne Place building. Surplus food is used in the community kitchen.

Name of Garden: **Regent Park, Garden 1**

Location: Dundas/Regent

Number of Plots: 50

Name of Garden: **Regent Park, Garden 2**

Location: 600 Dundas

Number of Plots: 40

Name of Garden: **Regent Park, Garden 3**

Location: 540 Dundas

Number of Plots: 30

Name of Garden: **Regent Park, Garden 4**

Location: 463 Gerrard

Number of Plots: 22

Description: These 4 gardens are coordinated by the Regent Park Community Health Centre. The plots are gardened by families and individuals from over 40 different cultural groups living in Regent Park. There is a long and growing waiting list. Tenure of the gardens is insecure, particularly in the face of the Regent Park redevelopment.

Name of Garden: **Leslie St. Allotment Gardens**

Location: Leslie Street/Commissioner

Number of Plots: over 200

Description:

Diverse community members from throughout the city garden here. Some are home owners. Many cultural backgrounds. Waiting list.

Name of Garden: **220 Oak Street**

Location: Oak Street/River

Number of Plots: 32 plots (20 individual and 12 communal)

Description: Reestablished in 2004 by tenant organization, some support from Toronto Housing Corporation, have applied for further funding, strong community involvement, regular events

Name of Garden: **Field to Table/Foodshare**

Location: Eastern Avenue

Number of Plots: N/A

Description: Youth at risk garden greenhouse program, composting, planting.

* All of these gardens are food growing gardens. Most of the plots are approximately the size of an average dining room table and in many cases over ten varieties of vegetables and edible plants are grown within these spaces.

Table 2: Event listing

Event	Date	Location	UGROW Involvement	Follow-up
Native Plant Talk/ Bean Planting	July 2004	Growing Together	Participation	
Canning Workshop	September 2004	Growing Together	Participation/provided supplies	
Garden Meeting	September 2004	Christian Resource Centre	“tell us what grows” song performed by musician/refreshments	Increased interest in participation in focus groups
Introduction to Composting/ Introduction to Herbs	September 2004	Christian Resource Centre	Facilitated	Compost education continuing
Community Garden BBQ	August 2004	CRC/Regent Park	Participation/refreshments	
Community Garden BBQ	August 2004	Miziwe Biik	Attended	Interview with coordinator
Harvest Cooking Event	October 2004	220 Oak (invited all participants)	Facilitated cooking from garden/discussion/feast	THC story SIF funding/possible community kitchen/training
Harvest Event/garden clean-up	November 2004	Moss Park	Participated/refreshments	Subsequent interviews with participants
Garden clean-up	November 2004	Growing Together	Participated	
Harvest Event	December 2004	Regent Park	Participated/song/refreshments	Increased interest/additional focus group
Herbal Salve Making	November 2004	Regent Park	Facilitated	Increased interest
Herbal Salve Making	January 2005	Mustard Seed	Facilitated	Increased interest
Composting	2004	Foodshare	Participated/involved	Interviews
Seedy Saturday	March 2006	Scadding Court Community Centre	Dynamic Display/Shared Findings/collected requests for final report	Distribution of report - pending

American Community Gardening Association Conference	2004	Toronto	Enc. Participation/attended	Increased engagement
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*explanation of terms:

Facilitated- initiated event and funded within UGROW budget

Participated-involved in set up or completion of tasks

Table 3: Focus group questions

Focus Group – Questions for Gardeners

- What do you grow in your garden, and why?
- What are the good things about community gardening?
- What worries you about community gardening?
- How did you start gardening, and why do you keep doing it?
- Who is touched by your gardening, and how?
- What questions about gardening, food and health would you like answered?
- What is the best way is to answer those questions?
- Can you help answer those questions, and how?
- How can gardeners, gardening organizations and researchers work together better?
- How can people at risk (like people without a safe place to live, or troubled youth) take part?

Table 4: Research dissemination

Regent Park community gardening newsletter story (July-August 2004)
CBC interview with participants (Metro Morning, October 2004)
American Community Gardening Conference presentation October 2004
CBC Radio Interview (Ontario Today, October 2004)
Toronto Housing Corporation newsletter story November 2004
*Toronto Community Garden Network Mini-Conference January 2005
Seeds, Soil and Stories community event (April 9, 2005) invited community members and participants to an interactive ,educational and social afternoon to share early findings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 150 participants in attendance; George Smitherman, Minister of Health attended; a list of participants interested in the final research findings was formed
CUHI Speaker Series: power point presentation of UGROW early findings April 2005†
CUHI Open House (poster presentation) May 2005
International Medical Geography Symposium (poster presentation), June 2005, Dallas TX
*Toronto Community Garden Network Potluck July 2005
American Community Gardening Association Conference (PowerPoint presentation/poster presentation/networking) August 2005, Minneapolis
* Christian Resource Centre/Regent Park Health Centre- community garden bbq summer 2005
Community University Expo September 2005, Winnipeg <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UGROW findings were distributed in flyer form
*Food For Talk- seminar series, September 2005,University of Toronto
*World Food Day –October 2005, Nathan Philips Square and Mel Lastman Square, Toronto <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive community garden display/networking
*Food For Talk-seminar series Toronto City Hall - October 2005
Regent Park newsletter story October - November 2005
*Royal Winter Fair – Food For Talk seminar series - November 2005
*Farm Folk City Folk Forum North York - November 2005
*Toronto Community Garden Network Potluck - November 2005
International Society of Urban Health Conference - November 2005
Poster presentation/networking/distributed UGROW postcards

*Youth and Gardening Subcommittee - November 2005
*Making Green Roofs Happen Forum –City Council Chambers UGROW deputation November 2005
UGROW postcards (500 printed) creative display of findings‡

*attended event/spoke about UGROW/distributed postcards or flyers

†UGROW power point presentation circulated to individuals expressing interest from the University of Saskatoon, Wilfred Laurier University, American Community Gardening Organization, and the Toronto Food Policy Council

‡Distributed to: community members, university members at University of Toronto, Queens University, Wilfred Laurier University, Ryerson University, Toronto District School Board, Toronto Public Health, Ontario Ministry of Labour, Toronto City Council, Regent Park Community Health Centre, Scadding Court Community Centre, Christian Resource Centre, Growing Together, Foodshare Toronto, Stop Community Food Centre, Bain Coop, Toronto Public Libraries, Toronto Community Garden Network, Wellsley Health Corporation, Centre For Urban Health Initiatives,

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