Comparison of community gardening efforts in Austin, New York City and San Francisco

Hannah P. Stebbins

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation


This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mail.lib.umt.edu.
The University of Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature **

Yes, I grant permission [✓]
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature

Date 12/16/96

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
A Comparison of Community Gardening Efforts in Austin, New York City and San Francisco

by

Hannah P. Stebbins

B.A. Trinity College, 1992

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Science

The University of Montana

1996

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date

12-17-96
Chapter 1

**Introduction to the topic**

Gardening is an activity that transcends age, race, income and gender differences. People garden in various climates and in diverse locations. Perhaps the most surprising garden site is that of the inner city. Vibrant colorful gardens grow among the poorest, dirtiest and least attractive neighborhoods. Gardening is a critical part of life for many inner city residents. People garden for a variety of reasons and gain different benefits through the experience.

**Background on the Topic**

I became interested in urban gardening while examining possible activities that connect inner city people to the natural world. Many urban residents do not have the time or money to leave the city and they are, therefore, excluded from traditional wilderness experiences. Gardening is one of the few ways to experience nature within a city. Planting, maintaining and harvesting a garden is a natural experience. The gardener interacts with the most basic biological processes. It seems logical to assume that gardening would help facilitate an environmental identity among gardeners.

“Environmental identity” is defined as a basic connection to the natural world. I decided to gather information to test the hypothesis that gardening creates an environmental identity among inner city people. Once I began researching urban gardening, I discovered that my hypothesis was nearly impossible to prove. People may be drawn to gardening because of a previously existing affinity to the natural world. It is difficult to prove which comes first, an interest in nature that leads to gardening or an interest in gardening that leads to deeper knowledge of the environment. To prove my original hypothesis, it would be necessary to
find a group of people who did not have prior gardening interest or experience. I would then interview these people before, during and after they participated in an urban gardening program. I did not have the resources to conduct this necessary research.

As I was researching my original hypothesis, I discovered that urban gardeners develop benefits extending beyond a connection to the natural world. These benefits entail access to affordable, nutritious food, the opportunity to recreate and other aspects of daily life. Gardening is a pro-active, locally based activity that is economically and logistically feasible for inner city people. I discovered that a more realistic paper topic is researching why people garden and what they gain from it. I also wanted to determine the factors that create a successful garden. There is already a lot of information on urban gardening in general but little material comparing gardening efforts in different cities. I discovered that a comparison study would be extremely useful to people involved in the field. Urban gardening groups and gardeners themselves can learn by the successes and obstacles of their counterparts in other cities.

Gardens and gardeners are acutely influenced by the place in which they garden. There are different climates, ethnic dynamics and support groups in distinct cities. These differences affect the style and success of specific gardens. I wanted to compare and contrast gardening efforts in three distinct cities. I choose to focus on San Francisco, Austin and New York City because they have different climates and ethnic populations. San Francisco and Austin both have year-round growing seasons although the climate in Austin is significantly warmer and dryer. New York City has a shorter growing season with approximately five winter months of frozen ground. The ethnic composition of Austin is predominantly White with a large percentage of Latinos and a smaller percentage of African-Americans.¹ San Francisco has a large percentage of Whites and Asians with a smaller percentage of Latinos and African-Americans.² New York City has a similar ethnic composition to that of San Francisco although there is a smaller percentage of Asians and a

¹ City of Austin: 1990 U.S. Census.
larger percentage of African-American people.\textsuperscript{3} The Latino population of NYC differs from that of San Francisco in that it is primarily comprised of people from Puerto Rican as opposed to Central and South American decent.\textsuperscript{4}

\textbf{Methods of Research}

I decided that the most effective way to compare and contrast gardening efforts in various cities was to visit the different cities and interview gardeners themselves. I visited Austin, San Francisco and New York City during the spring and summer of 1996. During my visits, I conducted personal interviews with gardeners, staff members of gardening organizations and teachers involved with gardening. I chose people who were involved with inner city gardening and were interested in sharing their experiences with me. I tried to get a representative sample of people from different ages, races and genders. I limited my research to people from low-income neighborhoods.

I interviewed people in a variety of settings with a portable tape recorder. The interviews were then transcribed into written form by a professional service. All of the participants verbally agreed to being recorded. Most of the conversations with organization staff and teachers were scheduled in advance. The interviews with community gardeners were conducted spontaneously, the idea being to capture a random sampling of people as they engage in gardening. Questions to community gardeners were organized in advance although the interviewer let the interviewee determine the style and pace of the conversation. I took color slides of many of the people and gardens that I visited. I had verbal permission from the people photographed.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{2} City of San Francisco: 1990 U.S. Census.
\textsuperscript{3} City of New York City: 1990 U.S. Census.
\textsuperscript{4} 1990 U.S. Census.
\end{footnotesize}
Goal of the Interviews

I spoke to community gardeners to discover why they gardened and what benefits they obtained through the experience. I asked generally the same types of questions from all the gardeners; how long had they gardened? what were they growing? and why did they garden? With regards to the last question I divided gardeners’ responses into five possible areas of benefit; therapeutic, financial, neighborhood pride, nutrition, and immigrant identity. Therapeutic is defined as those benefits which contribute to a person’s mental health, intangible rewards that help people feel better about themselves and their lives. Financial reward is money saved from growing food instead of buying it. Neighborhood pride is satisfaction in improving your area. Nutritional benefits are better health results from eating fresh, organic food. Immigrant identity is feeling a connection to your original homeland through gardening.

There are other areas that I discussed with community gardeners which are more difficult to identify and define as benefits. As mentioned earlier, I wanted to discover if gardening helps facilitate an environmental identity among low-income people. The first step towards developing an environmental identity is thinking and caring about the natural world. I asked gardeners if they thought more about the environment through gardening. The “environment” is defined as a person’s immediate surroundings. Factors affecting the natural environment include weather patterns, the health of the soil and the use of chemicals. The idea was that people who garden think about the natural world beyond their garden. A person worrying about the growth of their tomatoes for instance, pays attention to rain and soil condition. Variables affecting tomato growth are general aspects of the natural world. A person who gardens would therefore be more in tune with their environment. I tested this theory by asking gardeners if they thought about weather patterns, chemicals and other variables affecting the environment.
The issue of chemical use is critical in discussing community gardening. I did not meet any gardeners who used chemicals or at least admitted to doing so in community plots. I asked people why they did not use chemicals. I wanted to determine if people thought that chemicals were potentially harmful to themselves or to the natural world. Understanding threats to the environment which include chemicals, is part of developing a deeper knowledge of the natural world. Another reason why the chemical issue is important is because it affects the autonomy of the community garden. Gardeners who pesticides are not self-sufficient. They rely on fertilizers and pesticides which require money and outside expertise.

It is important that community gardens be self-sufficient so that gardeners feel maximum pride in their accomplishments. Most of the gardeners I met were very proud of their work in the garden. They felt self-confident because they accomplished something on their own. This sense of accomplishment is especially critical to low-income communities which face tremendous hardships. People who feel that life is often beyond their control take enormous pride and satisfaction in successfully growing their own food.

Another area which is similar to the environmental identity question in that it is important but difficult to prove is whether gardening helps facilitate a greater sense of community in a particular neighborhood. People who garden are more likely to meet their neighbors but it is unclear whether this interaction directly leads to a stronger sense of community. Community cohesiveness is difficult to measure. Oftentimes, the proof of community strength is not clear until the neighborhood is faced with an identifiable threat. Neighbors organize around particular issues. The other difficulty with proving community cohesiveness is determining to what extent it existed before the creation of the garden. Does a garden create community building or does it merely bring out already existing feelings? The issue of community is extremely important but cannot be measured in the same way as other benefits.
Community Gardens versus Special Population Gardens

There are two categories of gardens in the large topic of urban gardening, community gardens and special population gardens. Community gardens are neighborhood places where local residents have an assigned plot. This type of garden is open to all people in the neighborhood and is relatively self-sufficient. A special population garden is designed for a specific section of people such as students, the elderly, homeless or the disabled. These gardens are generally not self-sufficient as they depend on outside help for funding and manual labor. The topic of special population gardens is too extensive to include in this paper.

The only gardens that I researched in addition to community gardens were school gardens. I included school gardens because gardening has such a profound affect on kids. They develop self-confidence and other therapeutic benefits as well as nutritional and ecological education through gardening. School gardens differ from community gardens in atmosphere and in organization. Students are introduced to gardening through classes which they generally enjoy but are required to attend. The atmosphere is instructional with teachers assigning tasks to students. Community gardens, in contrast, have an informal atmosphere with gardeners choosing to come whenever they want and planting whatever they want. School gardens and community gardens are different enough that I will not compare them. I will however, compare school gardening programs between cities because I want to discover the dynamics that are involved in school gardening and the elements that contribute to a successful program.

Gardening Support Organizations
A critical element in shaping urban gardening efforts in particular cities is the existence of support groups. These organizations are dedicated to the promotion of gardening and can influence the character and success of gardens in specific areas. Non-profit organizations as well as government agencies offer various types and levels of assistance. Support groups can provide technical advice, gardening supplies and general encouragement. They can also act as the link between government or private funding and the gardens. I interviewed staff and volunteers of many of these organizations. The people involved in these groups were the most knowledgeable sources on gardening in their respective cities. They offered insight as well as practical help on the contacts and locations of various gardens. The approaches between gardening support groups vary. The differences range from financial to philosophical. I will describe the roles of the different support groups in each city. It is important to analyze gardens and gardeners in the context of this diverse support system.

History of Community Gardening

Community gardening has a long history in the United States. There are two particular periods when community gardening surged in popularity, the war years and the 1970s.\(^5\) During World War I, citizens were encouraged to garden as their patriotic duty. Community gardens were established in cities throughout the United States as commercial agriculture was sent to feed soldiers. These community gardens were referred to as "liberty gardens" and later as "victory gardens". An estimated 5 million gardeners grew $520,000,000 worth of food in 1918.\(^6\) After the war, many gardens were demolished as the postwar economy fueled real estate development.\(^7\) Community gardening was revived

---

\(^6\) Hynes: xi.
\(^7\) Hynes: xi.
in the early 1940s with World War II. People cultivated every available piece of city land and in 1944, victory gardens produced 44% of the total vegetables grown in the U.S. After the war, many gardens were again abandoned as the new suburban yard became the dominant feature of the American landscape. It was not until the 1970s that community gardening became popular again.

Community gardening became popular in the 1970s as people focused on community development. Gardening was seen as a tool to revitalize communities and advocates from a variety of progressive causes promoted it. People realized that gardening had many benefits beyond food production. The government helped facilitate the increase in community gardens with a 1976 program through the Department of Agriculture. The program assisted low-income gardeners in six cities and was eventually expanded to include twenty-three cities. Community gardening has continued to increase in popularity although cuts in many government programs during the 1980s hurt efforts. Gardening support groups have compensated for the decrease in government funding in many cities. The 1990s are a critical time for community gardening as advocates are developing creative ways to increase and improve gardening efforts.

Conclusion

Comparing the three cities of Austin, San Francisco and New York City is my way of contributing to the discussion of urban gardening. I think that my findings will be helpful to people involved in urban gardening and those new to the field. Gardeners and gardening support groups have much in common and can learn from each other. My observations of community gardening efforts are derived from personal conversations with

---

8 Hynes: xii.
9 Hynes: xiii.
10 Hynes: xiv.
11 Hynes: xiii.
12 Frank Fuller, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
people involved in the subject. I was not able to visit every community garden in each city but feel that I saw enough to derive general observations. I plan to present these unique conversations in the larger context of the benefits and challenges of urban gardening.
Chapter 2 - Austin

Introduction to Austin

I visited Austin in the spring of 1996. Austin is a relatively small city for the state of Texas but has many of the same problems found in larger cities such as urban poverty, gang related violence and multiracial conflict. Austin therefore provides a good context for examining the benefits and challenges of urban gardening in Texas.

The city of Austin, the location of the state capital, is divided into distinct demographic areas. The ethnic population of the city is 70.6% White, 12.4% African-American and 3.0% Asian. I focused my research in East Austin also referred to as the “Eastside”. East Austin is a medium sized, low-density area comprised primarily of low income people. More than 24,000 people live in an area slightly larger than six square miles. The average household income is $13,676 and nearly 40% of the residents live below the federal poverty level. The countywide household income is twice that of East Austin. The Eastside is a minority area with Latinos comprising 62% and African-Americans 32% of the population. One fourth of the area’s population are children under the age of 12.

Community Gardens in East Austin

Urban gardening has the potential to be enormously successful in East Austin. There is plenty of available land and the climate provides a year-round growing season.

---

There are community gardens scattered throughout the city although some are more successful than others. Major factors determining the success of a garden in Austin include location, access to water and interest of gardeners. Ideally, a community garden should be located in a central, easily accessible location within a neighborhood. Access to water is fundamental in a place as dry as south Texas. The dynamics between gardeners is another critical factor. It is ideal if the gardeners not only have the interest and skill in gardening but also get along with each other. Age diversity is necessary to insure the future of the garden. If all of the gardeners are elderly then the garden could die when they pass on.

Interviews with Community Gardeners

The best way to understand urban gardening in East Austin is to examine specific gardens. There are 9 community gardens in Austin, 4 of which are located in East Austin. The gardens I visited were fairly spacious with large plots for approximately 25 gardeners. Many of the gardeners were elderly although it was not uncommon to see younger people working in the evenings and on weekends. Most of the small gardens, approximately two-thirds, were started by older women. These women have the time and the drive to start the garden and will hopefully bring in other family members. I met gardeners from many different ethnic backgrounds who gardened for a variety of reasons. The most common reason was the acquisition of food. I think the best way to illustrate the benefits and challenges of gardening in East Austin is to look at a representative gardener. Hortense Lawson is an 82 year old African-American woman who started the Harvey Street community garden and remains its primary leader. The Harvey Street garden is located in a predominately African-American, low-income neighborhood. Hortense gardens

---

19 Eric Peterson, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
20 Peterson, 18 April 1996.
21 Eric Peterson, telephone interview, 21 November 1996.
22 Peterson, 21 November 1996.
23 Eric Peterson, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
for therapeutic, financial and nutritional reasons. She also experiences pride in her
neighborhood and a sense of community through gardening.²⁴

**Therapeutic**

The therapeutic rewards that Hortense gains from gardening include recreation and
mental health benefits. Gardening is Hortense's primary form of exercise and her
wholesome alternative to watching television. She spends about two hours a day in the
garden which keeps her muscles supple. Hortense started gardening when her husband
was dying and she needed a positive recreational activity. She wanted to create life as her
husband was losing life. She started the Harvey Street garden in a vacant lot across the
street from her house.²⁵

**Neighborhood Pride**

The Harvey Street garden is a great source of pride for Hortense and her neighbors.
There are only five other people who have plots at the Harvey site but Hortense is quick to
point out that the garden benefits everyone in the neighborhood. The garden makes the
neighborhood look better and inspires people to garden in their homes. People can grow
plants indoors in containers. Hortense meets new people through the garden. She talks to
people who stop as they walk or drive by the garden. It is clear that she has put a lot of time
and energy into gardening but gains tremendous satisfaction from it. The only difficulty
with the garden is getting access to water. The garden is not hooked up to water so she has
to drag a hose. Hortense is trying with the aid of a garden support group, the Sustainable
Food Center, to get help from the City Council. She said that the Council has promised to
get water on site soon.²⁶

²⁴ Hortense Lawson, personal interview, 19 April 1996.
²⁵ Lawson, 19 April 1996.
²⁶ Lawson, 19 April 1996.
Nutrition and Environmental Identity

Hortense appreciates the healthy free food she acquires from the garden. She grows a variety of flowers, vegetables and herbs. Hortense is extremely knowledgeable about her plants and their health. She does not use any chemicals in the garden. Hortense has known about the dangers of chemicals for a long time. She remembers “that silent spring” when DDT was sprayed in Austin and the birds and fireflies disappeared. Hortense relies on non-chemical methods for controlling pests in her garden. She uses boiling water and hand squashing to kill bugs and ants. Hortense clearly has an environmental identity.²⁷

Community Building

Almost all the gardeners I met, including Hortense, agreed that gardening is good for the community. People get to know their neighbors through gardening, especially in the larger gardens. The smaller community gardens are often run by a few people who already know each other but they form a different connection through the garden. Hortense said that the garden gave her and her friends “another kind of bond”.²⁸ Community gardens appear to strengthen pre-existing community ties and perhaps form new ones. It is important, however, not to idealize the role of gardening in community relations. Community gardens reflect the familial, racial and other dynamics of the neighborhood which can be positive or negative. Existing tensions often materialize in the garden. Eric of the Sustainable Food Center described the gossiping, bickering and petty backstabbing that he has witnessed in community gardens. People complain that someone is using too much water or that someone else’s children are running wild over the garden.²⁹ These are not serious confrontations but normal human interactions played out in the garden context. Community gardens in racially mixed neighborhoods can have tensions along racial lines. There is the 6th street garden, for example, in East Austin. This garden is

²⁷ Lawson, 19 April 1996.
²⁸ Lawson, 19 April 1996.
²⁹ Peterson, 18 April 1996.
predominantly used by African-Americans but is adjacent to a Latino homeowner. The Latino neighbor has dogs which run through the garden infuriating the African-Americans. The Latino neighbor claims that he needs the dogs for protection because “you all live here” referring to the African-Americans. The argument about the dogs reveals ethnic strain. Sometimes gardens reflect tensions within ethnic communities. Eric told a story about a garden in a Mexican-American neighborhood. The Mexican-American neighbors were unfriendly to the recent Mexican immigrants telling them they didn’t know how to garden. Eventually the garden served as an important meeting place for these neighbors who had dinner together weeks later.

**Ethnic Identity**

The ethnicity of gardeners effects the style and tone of most community garden. Gardeners from Austin’s large Mexican immigrant population often have extensive knowledge of gardening due to their agricultural backgrounds. Their gardens reflect this prior agrarian experience. Another way that ethnicity is manifest in the garden is through the choice of plants. Gardens in Mexican-American neighborhoods consistently have cilantro and tend to have a large selection of peppers. Gardens in African-American neighborhoods have a large percentage of collard greens and hearty vegetables such as eggplant and potatoes. Some gardens have more obscure herbs and vegetables that are not found in stores. Gardens reflect the culture of the ethnic neighborhood in which they are located.

**Sunshine Community Garden**

---

30 Frank Fuller, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
31 Eric Peterson, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
32 Peterson, 18 April 1996.
I visited the Sunshine Community Garden to research a garden that serves multiple neighborhoods. Sunshine covers 6 acres and is the largest community garden in Texas. I visited the garden on a number of occasions at various times to get a representation of gardeners. I saw both men and women of many different ages but most of whom were white. Frank of Austin Community Gardens, a gardening support group, told me that the garden is ethnically mixed but I did not see many African-American or Latino people. The people I spoke to at Sunshine said that the garden reflects a diverse community although I did not witness this characterization. Most of the gardeners felt a strong sense of community through working at Sunshine. The atmosphere was casual and friendly. People seem focused on their individual plots but took the time to talk with their neighbors.

The only disadvantage to Sunshine in terms of community building is the location. Sunshine is situated in a commercial area accessible by car or bus. It did not appear that gardeners at Sunshine live near each other or see one another outside of the garden. On the other hand, the large scale of the garden makes its existence improbable in another location. Sunshine is utilized by 350 people. The garden is centrally located between a number of different neighborhoods allowing gardeners from various areas to interact. People come to Sunshine for different reasons, therapeutic and nutritional benefits being the most common. Few people mentioned financial rewards or neighborhood pride. Most people said that they had positive interactions with new people through the garden although they did not extend this interaction to community building. There were recent immigrants, mostly Eastern European, who said that gardening connected them to their heritage.

Sunshine differs from other community gardens in Austin in its size and location. Most community gardens are situated in the center of a residential area. The location of a garden within a receptive neighborhood is essential to the sustainability of the garden. Eric

---

33 "Austin Community Gardens" brochure: 2.
34 Frank Fuller, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
35 Anonymous gardeners, personal interviews, 19 and 20 April 1996.
36 "Austin Community Gardens" brochure: 2.
37 Anonymous gardeners, personal interviews, 19 and 20 April 1996.
showed me a garden that was deteriorating from lack of use. People did not use the garden because it was located in an undesirable area next to a busy road surrounded by stores and abandoned lots. The garden must be easily accessible to people's homes and have an inviting atmosphere. Critical to the atmosphere is shade and space to socialize. Many gardens have an area with table and chairs for people to hang out. A successful community garden must incorporate this socializing component.

Support Groups for Community Gardeners

The two major garden support groups in Austin are the Sustainable Food Center (SFC) and Austin Community Gardens (ACG). These groups work together but have somewhat different niches. ACG was founded in 1975 as part of the University YWCA and became an independent non-profit group in 1987. The organization is dedicated to providing gardening opportunities to all Austinites. ACG views gardening as a vehicle for community building, education and sustainable food production. ACG sponsors many programs such as youth gardens, a food bank garden and numerous small community gardens. The current executive director of ACG is Frank Fuller. Both ACG and the SFC define their role as promoting gardening but not providing charity.

The Sustainable Food Center was founded in January 1993 by Kate Fitzgerald who remains the organization's executive director. Prior to 1993, Fitzgerald had worked for the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) directed by Jim Hightower. She founded the SFC when leadership changed at the TDA and the organization was no longer promoting sustainable agriculture. The SFC was established to address the twin issues of hunger and

---

38 Eric Peterson, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
39 "Austin Community Gardens": 5.
40 "Austin Community Gardens": 2-3.
the decline of the family farm.\textsuperscript{41} The economic future of the family farm is largely dependent on reaching the markets of the urban consumer. The SFC works to foster these connections, thereby helping both small farmers and hungry urban residents. An example of a SFC project is the farmers markets in East Austin. People on public assistance can now use food stamps and WIC coupons to purchase organic food.\textsuperscript{42}

The philosophical goal of the SFC is to promote long-term self-sufficiency for chronically hungry Texans.\textsuperscript{43} In a report entitled “Access Denied” the organization describes the problems facing Eastside residents in their efforts to obtain healthy, inexpensive food. Problems include transportation, an inadequate number of supermarkets in the area and high prices for basic goods. There are only two supermarkets serving the 24,000 residents as compared to the rest of Travis county which has one supermarket for every 8,876 people.\textsuperscript{44} The two Eastside markets are considered inferior by many residents to stores in other areas in terms of security, food selection and crowds.\textsuperscript{45} Residents are often forced to shop at convenience stores which offer expensive food that lack nutrition.\textsuperscript{46}

The lack of inexpensive, accessible, nutritious food in East Austin has extremely damaging consequences for residents. There is evidence that many of the resident’s health related problems are connected to poor diet. The site director from the neighborhood health clinic was quoted as saying that 40\% of diagnoses made at his clinic in 1994 were either diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or obesity, all of which are significantly affected by diet.\textsuperscript{47} Further evidence of the lack of affordable food is the fact that many residents rely on emergency food centers. There are more than 20 such centers in East Austin. Emergency providers are most utilized after the 15th of each month when food

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{41} Jennifer Kaecher, “Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Reducing Hunger: Progress from the Lone Star State”, \textit{The Land Report}: 1.

\textsuperscript{42} Kaecher: 2.

\textsuperscript{43} Kate Fitzgerald, “Food for thought”, letter to the editor, \textit{Austin American-Statesman}, 7 June 1995: 2.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Access Denied}: 11.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Access Denied}: 12.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Access Denied}: 14.

\textsuperscript{47} Editorial, “East Austin residents have few food sources”, \textit{La Prensa}, 22 April 1995: 1.
\end{footnotes}
stamps run out for many families. It is clear that the basic food needs are not being met in a sustainable way for many people.

The SFC views gardening as a critical part of the solution to food insecurity. Community gardening is a locally-based way for people to obtain inexpensive, healthy food. It is also an important recreational activity. The SFC and ACG work to support gardening efforts in low-income areas through a number of ways. The primary way that they help is through infrastructure support. A successful garden needs land, water and fencing. Land is plentiful in Texas although it is sometimes difficult to get permission to use it for gardening. Landowners are apprehensive about leasing their land because of liability issues. Certain owners fear that they could be held responsible if an accident occurred on their land. Support groups such as the SFC can act as intermediaries between landowners and gardeners. In some cases the state owns the land which makes the process of leasing easier.

Support groups put in the necessary time and money during the early stages of a garden in order to avoid chronic problems later on. The SFC and ACG invest staff time at the beginning of a new community garden and then slowly back off. The process of encouraging a community garden to become autonomous varies with communities and support groups. Frank of the ACG referred to Philadelphia Green's approach of slowly withdrawing from a garden until it is completely self-sufficient. The organization's garden coordinator visits a new garden once a week for the first year. During the second year, the coordinator comes once a month and during the third year, once a quarter. By the fourth year the garden is pretty much autonomous. The Philadelphia style is emulated in different cities throughout the United States.

---

50 Eric Peterson, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
51 Frank Fuller, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
The goal of autonomy is necessary for community building and also for practical reasons. The ability of support groups to help community gardeners is dependent on their funding situation. Funding is often unstable as many of the grants are garden specific.\textsuperscript{52} The unstable funding situation affects the organization's ability to help gardens on a long term basis. In the past, ACG was involved in the weekly operations of many gardens until the group suffered financial cutbacks. The garden coordinator position was eliminated and local community gardeners could not manage on their own.\textsuperscript{53} It is critical that community gardens are not dependent on support groups for survival.

An important way to encourage the autonomy of gardens is through the avoidance of pesticides. Frank and Eric described how the extremely large community garden program in nearby San Antonio incorporates chemicals to provide the maximum yield of vegetables. The program which is run by the Texas University extension program runs 25 gardens and spends approximately 5\% of its budget on pesticides and fertilizers.\textsuperscript{54} Frank sees this technical approach to community gardening as undercutting the goal of sustainability. The extension run gardens will never be autonomous because outside "experts" continually come in and spray. Local people will never have complete ownership in this way.\textsuperscript{55}

Community gardens in Austin are almost completely organic. Frank advocates integrated pest management. Gardens that have a diversity of plants naturally have less bugs. Avoiding the use of chemicals encourages gardeners to be more self-sufficient, to save money and to grow healthier vegetables.\textsuperscript{56} People who garden for themselves learn that organic produce is better for their bodies. This knowledge translates into increased consumer awareness. People who know that organic food is healthier are more inclined to buy organic at the grocery store. Gardening becomes a method of education.

\textsuperscript{52} Fuller, 18 April 1996.
\textsuperscript{53} Fuller, 18 April 1996.
\textsuperscript{54} Peterson, 18 April 1996.
\textsuperscript{55} Fuller, 18 April 1996.
\textsuperscript{56} Fuller, 18 April 1996.
Another way that people in East Austin are introduced to gardening is through programs in schools. Youth gardens are an important companion to community gardens although there is little formal connection between the two. Certain support groups work solely within schools and other organizations such as ACG work with both youth and community gardens although only on a limited basis. ACG currently sponsors five youth gardens at elementary and middle schools. There is not a district wide gardening program. The main impetus for creating a school garden is the interest of the teachers. A unique situation but an important model for youth gardens is the Green Classroom. This non-profit organization is dedicated to teaching kids through a hands-on approach. Students come from the nearby Becker Elementary School and are exposed to gardening at every grade level. They build compost bins, plant vegetables or participate in another outside, action-oriented activity. The Green Classroom was founded by the organization’s current director, Carla Marshall.

The Green Classroom

Carla Marshall founded the Green Classroom because of an interest in teaching kids about the natural environment. Students learn through gardening and also experience emotional benefits. The kids that come to the Green Classroom are often from poor, unstable home situations. Becker Elementary school is located in a low-income neighborhood with 30-40% of the kids living in a nearby housing project. Carla is consistently overwhelmed and discouraged by the stories that kids relay about their home life. A student will mention that he or she had to keep their dad from shooting their mom the night before or that their mom locked them out of the house. The atmosphere of the

57 “Austin Community Gardens”: 2.
Green Classroom contrasts with the violence of their daily lives. It is a small and safe place with a cheerful feeling. Kids feel safe and free to be themselves. Students develop a greater knowledge and appreciation of the environment through gardening related activities but this benefit is secondary to the benefit of emotional security.59

Carla sees immediate results from the hands-on approach to learning. She sees shy kids come out of their shell, and hyper-active kids focus on a constructive physical activity. Kids develop a sense of accomplishment from participating in tangible activities with visible results. They are amazed that they can plant seeds that will actually grow and produce food. In certain classes at the Green Classroom, kids sell their produce. Carla sees the business component as critical to instilling self-confidence and developing job skills. Kids are proud of their vegetables and motivated to sell them for money. In addition to learning horticulture, kids also learn basic skills such as math. These are skills which are introduced in the regular classroom but are sometimes best learned in the alternative atmosphere of the Green Classroom.60

Many of Carla’s students do not know where their food comes from when they arrive at the Green Classroom. Kids think that vegetables originate at the grocery store. Planting teaches kids food education and helps them forge a connection to the natural world. They also learn the importance of chemical-free gardening. Kids appear to give more attention to trees, soil and water after their experiences at the Green Classroom. They are encouraged to care for their environment. The implication is that the environment is their surrounding area, the neighborhood where they live and play. The “environment” is not a far off wilderness area. I asked Carla if she thought that gardening connected kids to their ethnic roots. She said that she did not see much correlation between gardening and ethnicity. Most of the kids are new to gardening regardless of their ethnic background. The class I attended at the Green Classroom was comprised primarily of Latino students. There

58 Carla Marshall, personal interview, 22 April 1996.
59 Marshall, 22 April 1996.
60 Marshall, 22 April 1996.
were 14 students, 13 were Latino and one was white. The ethnic makeup of the class is representative of Becker which is located in a minority neighborhood.61

Critical to the success of the Green Classroom is the support of teachers. Carla infuses a strong academic component into her curriculum which garners the support of teachers. I attended a class on water to get a sense of Carla's approach. Kids were exercising the traditional academic skills of reading and writing but they were also learning by conducting an outside soil survey. The goal of the water unit is for kids to compile information on water quality issues in the area. Kids conduct surveys on elements of the natural environment and then make water quality report cards. The report cards are given to people in the neighborhood. In this way kids learn while interacting with the local community.62

Community building is a goal of Green Classroom programs. The neighborhood is generally receptive to gardening but not especially involved with it. There are many single mothers who are struggling to survive and do not have time to get involved in recreational activities. Carla seemed pessimistic about getting these low-income mothers involved in gardening. She said that people have tried to start community gardens at the local housing project but the gardens are continually desecrated.63 Carla's experiences with vandalism were unique to my conversations with people in the gardening field. Most of the other people I spoke to did not view vandalism as a problem. It is difficult to tell if Carla's experiences were unique to that particular housing project or representative of a problem that other people did not encounter.

A Green Classroom program which has successfully encouraged community building is the youth-senior program. In this program, kids are paired with local senior citizens for gardening projects. Kids and seniors bonded quickly with no initial shyness. The program was successful because people in the neighborhood got to know each other in

---

61 Marshall, 22 April 1996.
63 Marshall, 22 April 1996.
a new context. Critical to the success of the program was the fact that seniors got a small stipend for participation. Carla would like to expand the program if funding allowed. She is constantly having to raise money just to keep existing programs at the Green Classroom. Funding comes mostly from private and federal grants. Carla is continually frustrated at the amount of time and energy she devotes to fundraising. She is the only full time staff person at the Green Classroom and is having less and less time to teach. She barely manages, but remains inspired by the kids.64

The Green Classroom is an unusual facility. There are few if any other on-site gardening organizations in schools. Most teachers have to rely on different avenues to expose their students to gardening. A small percentage of schools work with ACG but the more common way to get involved with gardening is through state 4-H programs.65 4-H is the youth arm of the extension service which is part of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). I met with Margaret Baggio who works for the extension service which is technically part of Texas A&M University. Margaret coordinates gardening related activities with many schools in Austin. We met at Martin Junior High School in East Austin.

4-H Programs

The role of Margaret Baggio and other 4-H representatives is providing information and supplies to teachers working on extension related programs. The environmental science class at Martin for instance, is zeroscaping the front of the school to beautify the area in an environmentally sensitive manner. Margaret supplied advice and supplies for the project. Students visited the Wildflower Research Center where they saw the benefits of landscaping with native plants and grasses. The native plants required little water and attracted many butterflies. The students then zeroscaped Martin in a similar way. They planted the area and made identification signs for each of the plants. The area is

64 Marshall, 22 April 1996.
aesthetically appealing and serves as a living educational tool. The zeroscaping project is part of a larger program where students identified 50 areas at Martin that they felt needed environmental improvement. The program is financed through a grant entitled “Learn and Serve” from the Texas Education Agency. Martin contracted 4-H because teachers felt that they did not have the expertise to teach gardening.66

The Learn and Serve grant is consistent with the 4-H philosophy of learning by doing and giving back to your community. Gardening is a way for kids to learn leadership development and life-long skills. Career development is a key component of 4-H programs. Curriculum is designed to give kids a background in agriculture which provides many jobs in Texas. There are agriculture related activities for every age level; introductory gardening in elementary school, horticulture skills in Junior High and agri-business in High School. 4-H programs cultivate applicable job skills in all their programs. There is a school-wide salsa contest at Martin for example. Students work in teams to grow and harvest plants for salsa. They learn gardening, critical thinking and team-building skills. The Junior Achievement Club is developing a marketing plan to assess the feasibility of commercially producing the salsa.67

The salsa project was an interactive unit that utilized contributions from many different classes. An English class prepared the recipe book while a math class measured and prepared the garden. A science class planted and a history class studied which plants were used during slavery. The interdisciplinary nature of the salsa project illustrates the many educational benefits of a school garden. The students were excited about the salsa proposal because they felt ownership over the project. They could see the results of their accomplishment.68

Margaret emphasized the emotional benefits that Carla described earlier. Kids are motivated and enthusiastic because they enjoy working in the soil. They gain confidence

65 Samantha Scribner (8th grade teacher at Martin Junior High), personal interview, 17 April 1996.
66 Margaret Baggio, personal interview, 18 April 1996.
67 Baggio, 18 April 1996.
by seeing what they can accomplish. The 4-H motto is to give every child the opportunity to experience success. Confidence building is especially important with shy or insecure kids. Margaret works with the bilingual class at Martin which is composed of kids who have recently moved to the United States. These kids primarily speak Spanish and respond well to learning through gardening. Students who have trouble with the language barrier often excel in the garden. They develop a sense of accomplishment through gardening that they do not have in the classroom. Another goal of 4-H programs is community building. There are Youth-Senior partnerships in certain 4-H projects. The kids assist the seniors by weeding their community garden and the seniors give technical advice at the school garden. Kids and seniors get to know each other and improve their garden at the same time. Other 4-H club community programs include planting and maintaining flower gardens at nursing homes. Kids have also helped with the Meals on Wheels program which delivers meals to elderly people.

Gardening is a critical way for students at Martin to learn about the natural world. The science class at Martin for example, had a weather station where students studied the effects of weather on plants. In addition to gardening, another way that students learn about the natural world is through composting. There are worm bins in certain classrooms at Martin and an outdoor compost pile. The environmental science class collects food scraps from the cafeteria for the worm bins. Students learn about decomposition and how their food waste can be recycled back into the soil. Gardening units also teach kids about the dangers of chemicals to the environment. Pesticides are not used in the school gardens. Students learn chemical-alternatives to pest control. Margaret promotes organic growing in schools but she is not as adamant as Frank and Eric for instance when it comes to pesticide use. She said that there are times when pesticides are good and that not all pesticides are

---

68 Baggio, 18 April 1996.
69 Baggio, 18 April 1996.
70 Scribner, 17 April 1996.
71 Baggio, 18 April 1996.
bad. Margaret did not specify which chemicals she was referring to but her position illustrates the diversity of opinion on pesticides. There are still defenders of certain pesticides especially in the technical, university related fields. The issue of pesticides remain contentious in the gardening world.

There are specific activities in 4-H programs designed to promote environmental stewardship. Students conduct a leaching experiment for instance, where they learn that water makes chemicals move faster in the soil. They do another experiment where celery is dipped in colored water which represents pollutants. Students see how fast chemicals can travel up the root system of plants and how polluted plants do not taste any different than unpolluted plants. They are learning that vegetables can have pollutants that you cannot taste. Other lessons include those on acid rain. The goal of these activities is to teach kids about the importance of good soil, pure water and clean air. Students start with the garden and then think beyond it to the larger environment.

The best way to understand the impact of gardening on kids is to examine a particular student. Ofelia Cruz is an eighth grader at Martin. She started gardening with the sixth grade bilingual class and currently participates in the salsa contest and other gardening-related activities. Ofelia is 16 and moved to Texas from Mexico four years ago. I went with the bilingual sixth grade teacher to Ofelia’s house to meet her and her family. Ofelia is the 4th of 10 children who live in a two bedroom house in a low-income neighborhood in East Austin. Ofelia is shy but loves gardening and was happy to talk with me about it.

Ofelia likes being outside and does not care that gardening gets her dirty. She enjoyed gardening at school so much that she started a garden at home. Ofelia and her mother planted garlic and green peppers in the front of their house. Ofelia was proud of her garden and insisted that I take some garlic home. It is clear that gardening gives Ofelia
a sense of accomplishment. She knew a little about gardening before she went to Martin because she helped her grandmother garden in Mexico. I asked Ofelia if she thought that other kids from Mexico had a prior knowledge of gardening but she wasn’t sure. It is extremely difficult to prove if people from specific ethnic backgrounds are more prone to gardening than others. Ofelia thought that kids wanted to grow the same thing whether they were African-American or Latino.75

Ofelia appreciates the food she gets from gardening. She likes to grow tomatoes, corn, peppers and watermelons. Ofelia said the garden vegetables taste better than food from the grocery store because they are fresh. Ofelia thinks about weather and other environmental factors because of the garden. She watches the weather channel to look for rain, temperature change and other conditions that affect plants. The garden is a good way for Ofelia to make new friends and meet people in the neighborhood. Ofelia meets neighbors who stop by the school garden to help out. Another way that students interact with neighbors is by selling vegetables from the garden. The school garden provides fresh food and makes the neighborhood look prettier.76

Ofelia’s experiences reveal the multiple benefits of gardening programs in schools. Students have varied reactions to gardening but overall it is an enjoyable way for them to learn many subjects. The problem with school gardening programs is that they are not implemented on a city-wide or district-wide basis. Teachers get their students involved with gardening on an individual class level. Certain students are exposed to gardening while others do not depending on the interest of the teacher. Garden support groups would like to expand school programs but they have limited power and small budgets.77 Much of the funding of garden programs is project specific. Schools and community groups are tied to activities defined by grants and unable to develop long term visions.

---

75 Ofelia Cruz, personal interview, 17 April 1996.
76 Cruz, 17 April 1996.
77 Peterson and Fuller, 18 April 1996.
Conclusion

School and community gardens provide critical benefits to the residents of East Austin. These benefits are exemplified in the experiences of people like Hortense Lawson and Ofelia Cruz. In order to provide gardening opportunities to more residents, it is necessary to coordinate and expand garden support programs. Organizations such as the SFC and 4-H contribute services that could extend to more gardens and more residents if resources allowed. There needs to be city-wide opportunities for gardening which can be achieved through increased funding, public education and legislative support. ACG is encouraging the legislature to pass a bill to create a task force to promote urban gardening. The legislature could help in other ways such as offering economic incentives to landowners who allow gardening on their property. Coordination between people involved in urban gardening is essential. There is currently communication between certain groups but other organizations work on their own. A disincentive to working together is competition for funding. Groups that should work together are often seeking money from the same foundation or government agency. The funders should encourage groups to work together.

The benefits and challenges to urban gardening in Austin are unique in certain ways but typical in other ways. Gardening in Austin is influenced by the unusually dry and warm climate and the particular ethnic composition of the city. Gardening in Texas also differs from many other parts of the country in the presence of an agricultural heritage. The gardening situation is similar to other areas in that participants experience many of the same benefits. The best way to understand the similarities and differences between gardening in Austin and other cities is to examine a different city for comparison.

78 Fuller, 18 April 1996.
79 Fuller, 18 April 1996.
Chapter 3 - New York City

Introduction to New York City

New York City is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States with over 7 million people living in the five boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx. The area is ethnically diverse with 52.3% White, 28.7% African-American and 7.0% Asian residents. Millions of people live in a relatively small geographic region making the area very densely populated. This crowding influences many aspects of life in the city including gardening. The types of gardens and the reasons why people garden are shaped by the demographics of living in NYC.

Community Gardens in New York City

Neighborhood beautification is the most common reason for gardening in NYC. People want to beautify their neighborhoods which tend to be crowded and dirty. It is therefore not unusual to see a community garden with more flowers than vegetables. This situation contrasts with that of Austin where neighborhood beautification is generally secondary to food production. Another factor explaining this difference could be easier accessibility to food in NYC as compared to Austin. There are many more grocery stores and emergency food providers in densely populated NYC than in Austin. If people have regular access to food, there is less incentive to grow it themselves. Another general characteristic of community gardening in NYC is the proliferation of gardens and the diversity among them. There are over 1400 community gardens in the five boroughs. These gardens reflect the ethnic diversity of the City. There are small gardens representing

---

specific ethnic groups as well as larger gardens representing a diversity of ethnic groups. This situation differs from that of Austin where gardens are more homogeneous. Neighborhoods in Austin are more ethnically segregated than in NYC because there is a lower population density per square mile.

Gardening support groups in NYC reflect the densely populated and diverse nature of the city. There are many different types of organizations involved in numerous methods of support. The diverse network of garden support groups contrasts with the situation in Austin where there are a small number of organizations working on community gardening. The support groups in NYC have more staff, bigger budgets and serve a much larger constituency. Other differences between community gardening in NYC and Austin include issues of land availability, climate, and vandalism. These differences affect the atmosphere and dynamics of gardening. Another difference is that organizations in NYC seem to have a stronger interest in composting that groups in Austin. This can be explained by the fact that garbage is a bigger issue in NYC than in Austin. There are also many similarities between gardening in Austin and NYC. Similarities include motives for gardening and obstacles to successful gardens. It is through the examination of specific gardens and particular organizations that similarities and differences are illustrated.

Interviews With Community Gardeners

I visited community gardens in the five boroughs of New York City although I spent more time in Manhattan and in Brooklyn because those are the boroughs with the most gardens. In Manhattan, I focused on the gardens of the Lower East Side, also referred to as Alphabet City. There are over forty community gardens in this 14 by 4 block

---

81 Lisa Schreibman (Staff member of The Green Guerrillas), personal interview, 29 May 1996.
area which is located between Houston to 14th street and Avenues A to D. The neighborhood is a predominantly low-income area of mostly Latino residents with a smaller percentage of African-Americans and an even smaller percentage of Whites. I visited most of the gardens in this area which is also referred to as the Loisaida community.

It is incredible that there are so many gardens in Alphabet City. The area is extremely noisy, dirty and chaotic in atmosphere. It did not seem like a region conducive to gardening. The gardens were small for the most part and had an informal, spontaneous feeling to them. I was struck by the contrasting feeling between the gardens and the rest of the neighborhood. The gardens were the only aesthetically appealing places in the area and had an aura of cleanliness and almost calm compared to the rest of the neighborhood.

Gardening is a critical part of daily life for many people especially the elderly. There were people in the gardens at all times of day. I met a lot of people who were relaxing and socializing and not actually gardening. Most of the people in the gardens were elderly. All of the gardens I visited had an area for hanging out, sometimes this area was larger than the planting area. There was music playing in many of the gardens and people were talking, playing games and eating. Almost everyone I spoke to was friendly and interested in telling me about their gardens. There was some initial hesitation as I was clearly an outsider to the neighborhood. I organized the results of my interviews in sections according to the various benefits people derive from gardening.

**Therapeutic**

The elderly gardeners in Alphabet City spend a significant part of their daily lives in the garden. They are proud of their work and gardening gives them a sense of purpose. For example, Olena For founded the All People's Garden and manages it as a full time job. In the summer she works or sits in the garden from 10 am to 4 pm every day. She is a 75 year old African-American woman who has gardened in the same lot for 17 years. She

82 "We've got to get Back to the Garden" brochure, The Green Guerrillas, 1995: 2.
commands respect from people in the neighborhood through her role as supervisor of the garden. Olena keeps tract of her neighbors from the garden especially the young people. She disciplines kids when necessary like the time she confronted a teenager who was selling drugs in front of the garden. The teenager threatened to kill her if she didn't move so she told him to go ahead and kill her. The boy backed down and everyone on the block has respected her ever since. The garden is her territory, her identity and her way of giving to the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{83}

Olena's sense of purpose in the garden is shared by many other elderly gardeners in Alphabet City. A few blocks from the All People's Garden is the Los Amigos garden. I spoke to one of the founders of the garden who is an elderly Puerto Rican man who wished to remain anonymous. This man whom I will call Jose retired in 1990 and now spends most of his time in the garden. Gardening is his job, his way of feeling useful and his means to accomplish something.\textsuperscript{84} The sense of purpose that Olena, Jose and other elderly people derive from gardening is qualified as a therapeutic benefit. Olena's interest in gardening connects to her deepest thoughts about the world and her religious beliefs, "God created all of this (the garden) and He created it with love. And when I circle the tree don't that green make you feel good... that's when He gets into your body...since I've been in this garden all these things come to mind."\textsuperscript{85} Olena has faith and hope which enables her to live through the worst times like the death of her son from AIDS. Her religious convictions are the foundation of her life and they are affirmed through gardening.

\textbf{Neighborhood Beautification}

After therapeutic, the second most common benefit derived from gardening in Alphabet City is neighborhood beautification. All of the gardeners I interviewed said that gardening improved the neighborhood. Jose for instance, described how the garden site

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{83} Olena For, personal interview, 30 May 1996.
\item \textsuperscript{84} "Jose" is an anonymous gardener in Alphabet City, personal interview, 30 May 1996.
\item \textsuperscript{85} For, 30 May 1996.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
was previously a vacant lot filled with garbage and drugs. He was proud that he had made
the lot beautiful, clean and that he had done it on his own. The benefit of neighborhood
beautification is connected to the therapeutic benefits of self-confidence and pride. The
experiences of Jose are echoed by other community gardeners in Alphabet City. Dan
Gilbert is an elderly African-American man who started a garden on 8th street and Avenue
C. He cleared a lot that was full of debris from a building that burned down. The area is
now blossoming with flowers, trees, shrubs and vegetables. Olena was propelled to start a
garden after getting tired of seeing and smelling garbage all the time. She converted an
abandoned lot into a beautiful lush area complete with walkways and quiet places for
people to sit and read.

Almost everyone I met in Alphabet City mentioned the drugs and garbage as
reasons for creating gardens. This situation differs from Austin where neighborhood
beautification was not a major incentive for gardening. People in Austin are not as routinely
confronted with drugs and garbage as New Yorkers. The higher density population in
New York City contributes to more waste and less space compared to Austin. Gardens in
NYC are much smaller than those found in Austin because there is less available land.
These gardens provide much needed communal space. New Yorkers live in crowded
conditions and use the garden space for activities beyond recreation. I was surprised to see
how many gardens had cooking facilities for instance. This situation contrasts with Austin
where people were either gardening or socializing but not cooking, conducting carpentry
projects or having domino tournaments like in NYC. The different atmospheres between
the two cities create different needs for gardens.

**Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity is an essential component of community gardens in NYC. People
did not directly single out ethnicity as a reason for gardening but ethnic pride was clearly

---

86 “Jose”, 30 May 1996.
apparent in their gardens. Puerto Rican flags, murals and religious symbols were abundant in community gardens throughout the city. Many of the gardeners are immigrants from rural areas. Gardening is a way for these people to connect to their past.

This situation contrasted with Austin where I did not see any flags or symbols in the community gardens. Most of the people I met in the Alphabet City were Latino. People spoke Spanish to each other and played Latino music. There were a few African-American gardeners and even fewer White gardeners. Gardens tended to be racially segregated.

Community Building

I did not get the feeling that gardens in Alphabet City helped facilitate greater community cohesiveness. Most of the people working in the small gardens already knew each other. The garden is a critical place to see friends but not necessarily meet new ones. Jose said that his garden is open to everyone and that lots of people appreciate it although only his friends garden there.® This particular garden is extremely small which contributes to the limited number of new people. There is also a kind of cliquish feeling as elderly Puerto Rican men clearly dominate the scene. Small gardens are often segregated along racial lines but also by other categories. I visited the 6th Street/Avenue C garden which is used predominately by gay and lesbian gardeners.® Larger gardens are more conducive to finding a greater diversity of people. It is larger gardens that have the potential to reach beyond one specific segment of the community.

A much larger community garden is exemplified by the 6th Street/Avenue B garden. This garden is located in an ethnically mixed area of Alphabet City. I interviewed Joel, a young white man who is regularly involved with the garden. The 6th Street/Avenue B garden consists of many raised beds with a central area of tables and chairs for socializing. The garden is well organized with many individual plots. There is an abundance of flowers.

® For, 30 May 1996.
® “Jose”, 30 May 1996.
® Joel, personal interview, 26 July 1996.
and vegetables giving the garden a lush, densely populated atmosphere. I met people in the
garden from a variety of ethnic backgrounds including Asian, White, Black and Latino.
Joel said that different people interacted through the garden but that interactions were not
always pleasant. Gardeners argued over many issues including structural planning,
vandalism and funding. Most of the arguments were based on personality dynamics not
ethnic differences. Joel said tensions were highest between white gardeners. The tension
could derive from the fact that many people come to the garden with personal problems.
They view gardening as a way to get out their aggressions. Joel thought that overall the
garden helped community relations because it provided a forum for interaction and dialogue
but that it did not solve everything.90

Environmental Identity

Almost all the gardeners I met in Alphabet City felt a connection to the natural world
through gardening. They liked working in the dirt and appreciated being outside. Most of
the gardeners had prior knowledge and interest in nature which propelled them to start
gardens. Jose had gardened and composted since he was 12 years old growing up in
Puerto Rico.91 Dan Gilbert grew up farming92 and Olena remembered gardening while she
was growing up in Florida.93 All of these gardeners applied their prior experiences to the
contrasting context of Alphabet City. Olena feels that she is part of nature and will
eventually return to the dirt in the form of ashes.94 Other gardeners have a more practical
philosophical approach to gardening. Jose uses his knowledge of the environment to make
his garden more prosperous. He collects rain water in huge tubs because it is better for his
plants than tap water which contains chlorine. Jose also has a large compost pile which
includes scraps from the local supermarket. He learned the importance of composting

90 Joel, 26 July 1996.
91 "Jose", 30 May 1996.
92 Dan Gilbert, personal interview, 26 July 1996.
93 For, 30 May 1996.
94 For, 30 May 1996.
while growing up on a banana farm. Jose says that his vegetables are better than those found in stores because they are chemical-free. Jose’s methods of gardening reveal his appreciation and knowledge of nature. He has an environmental identity which is affirmed through gardening.

**Nutritional**

Jose clearly appreciates the nutritional value of getting fresh, healthy food. This nutritional benefit was not the foremost benefit of gardening for people in Alphabet City. Most people mentioned neighborhood beautification or therapeutic benefits well before nutritional reasons. Dan Gilbert for example, told me that he started a garden because he “just wanted to grow something.” He did not differentiate in importance between flowers, vegetables or trees. The act of growing is more important than the results of his work. Most of the gardeners I spoke to grew flowers and vegetables or just flowers. Joel does not grow food because he fears that the dirt is contaminated with lead or other heavy metals. There were other gardeners growing only flowers because of their aesthetic importance. I did not meet many gardeners who grew only vegetables.

**Financial**

I was surprised at how few of the gardeners I interviewed mentioned the financial benefits of growing their own food. I am not sure why people did not mention financial savings, either they were not saving much or they did not perceive it as a benefit. This situation differed from Austin where financial benefits were mentioned frequently by gardeners. A possible explanation of these differences is the better accessibility of food in NYC. There are fewer grocery stores in the low-income neighborhoods in Austin than in NYC creating more incentive for food gardening.

---

95 “Jose”, 30 May 1996.
96 Gilbert, 26 July 1996.
97 “Jose”, 30 May 1996.
Community Gardening in other neighborhoods in Manhattan

Alphabet City is only one of the many areas in New York City with community gardens. I visited gardens in different parts of Manhattan and in the four other boroughs. In general, gardens reflected the neighborhoods in which they were situated. The Liz Christy garden for instance, is adjacent to Alphabet City but in a more affluent part of the lower east side. This garden is predominately used by white, middle-income people. The garden is beautifully manicured and showcases a variety of flowers, herbs and vegetables. It has carefully kept walkways and an intricate composting system. I attended a weekly potluck at the garden to get a sense of the gardeners. There were mostly white, middle aged, professional people. Everyone was friendly and it was clear that the garden provides an important gathering place and opportunity to meet neighbors. There was a much more formal and organized feeling to the gathering than found at one of the nearby Alphabet City gardens. Gardeners also reflect the different atmospheres in which they resided.

I visited gardens in uptown Manhattan to see how they compared to the gardens of the lower east side. In general, I found fewer gardens but they were larger in size. Gardeners uptown were from the same ethnic groups as people downtown although in different proportions. There is a larger proportion of African-American gardeners and fewer Whites for instance. One particular uptown garden that I focused on was the West Side Community Garden. I was interested in this garden because it is located in a mixed race and mixed income neighborhood. The garden is on Amsterdam and 90th street which is basically the border between the wealthy, white neighborhoods below the 90s and the low-income, minority neighborhoods above the 90s. There was a fairly even mix of White, African-American and Latino people when I visited the garden. Everyone was cordial to each other but concentrating on the work of his or her individual plot. There
were also a few people hanging out at a communal table speaking Spanish. The garden is much larger than those found in Alphabet City reflecting the lower density atmosphere of the Upper West Side. I spoke to a few gardeners but my presence was not well received. I got the sense that there were some strange dynamics between people in the garden. My suspicions were confirmed upon interviewing John who defined himself as the "guy in charge".  

John is a 51 year old Puerto Rican man who helped start the West Side Community Garden 10 years ago. He was reluctant to speak to me but eventually agreed. It appears that there are two very divergent groups of people who use the garden. There are the "professionals" who are mostly White and come to the garden solely to grow vegetables. The other group of garden users, to which John belongs, are those that use the garden for socializing. This group of people are Latino and live in the low-income buildings across the street from the garden. John said that there were frequent confrontations between the two groups of gardeners. I am not sure if John was accurately portraying the situation but his description brings up key issues for mixed income gardens. These gardens do not always facilitate greater community building. The West Side Community garden reflects existing tensions within the neighborhood. It could be a vehicle for developing community cohesiveness but it must be accompanied by a willingness of residents to realize this potential.

My conversation with John also illustrates the importance of personality dynamics. John is angry at other gardeners and fuels existing tensions through his attitude and behavior. John gardens but he is not particularly interested in what he grows. He does not cultivate vegetables because he likes food from supermarkets. I am not sure what John's official position is but he claims it is one of authority. He says he is in charge of the garden yet he clearly hates the job. This situation brings up the issue of hierarchy within

---

98 John, personal interview, 3 June 1996.
99 John, 3 June 1996.
100 John, 3 June 1996.
community gardens. Many gardens have self-appointed leaders which can be problematic if the person does not work well with other people. John is not on speaking terms with many of the “professionals” and I was unable to get a sense of how well he is received by the other group of gardeners. I did meet two friendly Latino gardeners who were growing vegetables but they deferred to John for information on the garden. Community garden leaders are important because they often represent the garden to neighborhood groups or garden support organizations.

Community Gardens in Other Boroughs

As mentioned earlier, there are community gardens in all five boroughs of New York City. There are many similarities between gardening in the different boroughs. There are also differences which tend to center around issues of land availability and ethnicity. Manhattan for example, has the highest land prices (excluding Harlem)\(^{101}\) which decreases the availability of vacant lots for gardening. Therefore, gardens in Manhattan are generally smaller than those found in other boroughs. There are more predominant ethnic populations in different boroughs which can also affect gardening. The Bronx for example has a majority of African-American people while Queens has a majority of White residents. These ethnic differences are reflected in the ethnic composition of gardens and in the types of vegetation chosen for planting.

Brooklyn was the other area I focused on because it has more gardens than any other borough. There are approximately 400 community gardens in Brooklyn of different sizes and styles.\(^{102}\) Brooklyn is the largest borough in NYC in terms of the amount of land yet the population density is relatively low. People are more spread out than in other boroughs so there is less interaction between various ethnic and economic groups.

\(^{101}\) Pat Jasatis (staff member of the Brooklyn Botanical Garden), personal interview, 3 June 1996

39
Neighborhoods tend to be segregated which is reflected in the more homogenous ethnic composition of community gardens. The neighborhoods of Brooklyn are well established with families living in the same areas for many generations. As a result, there are many neighborhood and block associations which often support gardens. In general, neighborhood associations are more interested in growing flowers than vegetables because their goal is neighborhood beautification.¹⁰³

I visited a few specific gardens in Brooklyn and spoke to gardeners about their experiences. In general, gardeners derive many of the same benefits as gardeners in Manhattan although the atmosphere seemed more open and relaxed. I met gardeners of all different ages although elderly women were the proportionally dominant group. There were people of various ethnic backgrounds including many Eastern Europeans. I saw different styles of gardens from carefully planned and well organized to more spontaneous and informally arranged. Almost every garden I visited had a significant portion of space reserved for socializing. It was not uncommon to see people hanging out in the garden till 10 or 11 at night. There were a few instances of tensions between people but overall the feeling was positive between gardeners. The most common reason people mentioned for gardening was neighborhood beautification. Everyone agreed that the garden aesthetically improved the area, and many people told stories of drug dealing or garbage dumping that existed on the site prior to establishing the garden.¹⁰⁴

"City Farmers: Tales from the Field"

In addition to visiting specific gardens in Manhattan and Brooklyn, I also attended an exhibit in the Bronx of photos and essays of low-income community gardeners in NYC. The exhibit was sponsored by GreenThumb, a gardening support group and was entitled

¹⁰² Jasatis, 3 June 1996.
¹⁰³ Jasatis, 3 June 1996.
¹⁰⁴ Brooklyn gardeners, personal interviews, 3 June, 4 June and 26 July 1996.
"City Farmers: Tales from the Field". The exhibit was the culmination of interviews from over 100 gardeners representing almost 70 gardens in different boroughs. The information presented in the exhibit supported many of my impressions from interviews. Ethnic identity, neighborhood beautification and therapeutic benefits were the primary reasons people gardened. It is worthwhile to examine a few of the comments to get a sense of the emotion and feelings expressed by gardeners in their own words.

Ethnic pride especially among Puerto Ricans, Haitians and Jamaicans was prevalent among many gardeners. Jesus Velazquez of East Harlem expressed this pride, "My garden means love and life. It breathes Puerto Rican culture. For me, my garden is Puerto Rico.... It has changed my life completely. Now I don't feel lonely like before." Tony Rodriguez of the South Bronx also wrote about Puerto Rico, "With this garden we bring back to Hispanic people that feeling of Puerto Rico, the working hard feeling working the soil again." Julio Barett related similar feelings about his homeland in the Dominican Republic, "My culture and traditions decided for me to create something in the heart of "El Barrio" that would remind me of my homeland, a place I will never forget. I also wanted to bring a part of my country to Spanish Harlem."

Gardeners expressed powerful words about the therapeutic benefits of gardening. Virginia Spruill of Brooklyn wrote that "Tilling the garden has changed the life of many of my elderly neighbors who otherwise would have idle hands as well as idle minds. My garden has given them time and a purpose to venture out of their lonely homes." Martha Hinton of Brooklyn feels strongly about her garden, "I never want to leave it. My garden has changed my life because I am no longer bored. It fills my day with something new and

106 Jesus Velazquez, "City Farmers: A Portrait of GreenThumb Gardens and Gardeners", GreenThumb exhibit, Katherine McGlynn photographer, Jane Weissman curator, Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture, Bronx, NY.
107 Tony Rodriguez, GreenThumb exhibit.
108 Julio Barett, GreenThumb exhibit.
109 Virginia Spruill, GreenThumb exhibit.
Lucinda Martinez of the Bronx had more philosophical feelings about the garden, "I feel relaxed—it's like a therapy for me. I escape to my own fantasy world. I love to hear the birds sing. It all feels so peaceful." Benjamin Saurez of the South Bronx reveals feels that "Our garden has truly helped add more richness to our normally dreary struggling lives...It really has created a sense of community".

This feeling of community is echoed by other gardeners. Annie Thompson of Brooklyn feels that "The garden can take credit for bringing the neighborhood together...To be friendlier and kinder in the atmosphere of mother nature." Lucille Laird of Queens views the garden as a way for people to meet, "One gardener did not know her neighbors until the garden began. It was a pleasure seeing her asking her neighbors names and addresses. They chatted and shared the inexpressibles and experiences of gardening." People are drawn to gardens because of this key socializing component.

Benny Jacobs of Brooklyn wrote that "Our garden is like a second home. Late in the evening when everyone has come home, we meet in the garden..." Brian Howard of Manhattan reveals that "We have had wedding parties, birthday parties and brunches thrown at the garden that made it look like the spot to give a party. I am always bursting with pride..."

The positive garden atmosphere contrasts with the rest of the area in many poor neighborhoods. Julie Kirkpatrick of Manhattan wrote, "The garden, to me and others in our group, is our "safe" haven...We struggle to work cohesively as a group...We have shaped a little corner of our world into something to which we feel connected. The garden makes our lives here more bearable and more enriched."

Gertrude Rainey of Central Harlem feels that, "Here, in my garden, I am not merely in touch with nature, I am part of

---

110 Martha Hinton, GreenThumb exhibit.
111 Lucinda Martinez, GreenThumb exhibit.
112 Benjamin Saurez, GreenThumb exhibit.
113 Annie Thompson, GreenThumb exhibit.
114 Lucille Laird, GreenThumb exhibit.
115 Benny Jacobs, GreenThumb exhibit.
116 Brian Howard, GreenThumb exhibit.
the universe...". Gardens are one of the few aesthetically pleasing areas in many neighborhoods. Tito Arroyo of the Bronx wrote that “The landlord to the right of the garden said, “This garden makes this block, my building, more valuable and more beautiful.” Michael Webster of Brooklyn reflected on his garden, “This garden is a place of peace. As you sit and watch this garden, you would never think it was a dumping ground before.” There is a feeling of pride in converting ugly lots into beautiful gardens. John Kelly also of Brooklyn said, “This lot has come a long way since I first started it. People come by and tell us how good it looks. I want the whole block to look better.”

The reflections of gardeners in the Bronx exhibit reveal the multiple benefits of community gardening for low-income New Yorkers. The exhibit was organized by GreenThumb, a critical garden support group. There are many organizations in NYC that provide necessary help to gardeners. It is important to examine these groups in detail to understand the role they play in community gardening.

Gardening Support Groups

Almost all the community gardens I visited were supported by a gardening assistance organization in some capacity. There are certain organizations that are dedicated solely to promoting community gardening and other groups where gardening is one of many programs. The goals and philosophies of garden support groups also differ from one another. Certain groups exist for technical support while others offer a more holistic,

---

117 Julie Kirkpatrick, GreenThumb exhibit.
118 Gertrude Rainey, GreenThumb exhibit.
119 Tito Arroyo, GreenThumb exhibit.
120 Michael Webster, GreenThumb exhibit.
121 John Kelly, GreenThumb exhibit.
broader vision approach. I began my research by visiting the offices of different support groups to get a sense of their approaches.

GreenThumb leases city lands to gardeners and is the organization that supports the largest number of gardens. There are approximately 1000 different lots comprising 125 acres leased by GreenThumb to over 700 community groups. GreenThumb is part of the Parks and Recreation Department of the City of New York. The program is currently funded through community development block grants. GreenThumb was started in 1978 in response to the growing number of requests to garden on city-owned land. GreenThumb offers practical help to people interested in starting community gardens in their neighborhoods. The organization provides leases for $1.00 a year to eligible community groups. Many of the community gardens discussed earlier, especially in Alphabet City are leased by GreenThumb.

GreenThumb provides the resources for people who have the motivation and initiative to start a community garden. The organization requires interested gardeners to meet minimal requirements to obtain a lease. Requirements include a letter of support from the local community board, the signatures of at least 8 gardeners and basic information on the proposed lot. In return, GreenThumb provides an initial clean up of the vacant lot, a one year lease and the opportunity for people to participate in gardening workshop. GreenThumb can also help with supplies and technical assistance. The most expensive start up costs are for soil, fencing material and lumber to build raised beds. GreenThumb gardens must meet inspection requirements for lease renewal. The assumption underlying GreenThumb activities is that people should have the initiative to take advantage

---

123 “GreenThumb Fact Sheet”, GreenThumb, 1996.
125 “GreenThumb: How to get Started”, GreenThumb: 2.
126 Leasing Application, Operation GreenThumb, City of New York Parks & Recreation, 1996.
of available resources. GreenThumb offers a practical approach to helping people gain access and tools for community gardening.

The Green Guerrillas is another organization dedicated to urban gardening with a different approach than GreenThumb. The Green Guerrillas operates with an activist philosophy emphasizing the importance of greening to strengthening neighborhoods. The idea is to “inspire and empower” people to create community gardens from empty lots. Community gardening can help unite people from diverse backgrounds under the common goal of investing in neighborhoods. The Green Guerrillas is also committed to educating people about environmental issues. People gain hands-on knowledge about ecology through garden work. The Green Guerrillas unites issues of education, empowerment, and community under the umbrella of greening.129

The Green Guerrillas was founded in 1973 by a group of community activists. Liz Christy and her neighbors on the Lower East Side wanted to do something about the dirty, garbage filled vacant lots in their neighborhood. They started throwing peat/seed “bombs” into abandoned lots hence the name of the organization.131 Their tactics evolved and eventually they created their first community garden on the Lower East Side. Green Guerrillas soon began helping other gardening activists with supplies and technical help. By 1994, the group provided almost $300,000 in donated gardening supplies and technical help to more than 20,000 New Yorkers in 600 communities.132 The group works in all five boroughs often in conjunction with other greening organizations.

The Green Guerrillas is a non-profit organization that relies primarily on volunteer help to accomplish its goals. The group has a paid staff of 4 people and an annual budget of $167,000.133 There are 350 active volunteers who donate approximately 15,000

130 "Green Guerrillas Programs", Green Guerrillas, 1996.
131 "Green Guerrillas Fact Sheet", Green Guerrillas, 1996.
132 "Green Guerrillas Fact Sheet".
133 "Green Guerrillas Fact Sheet".

45
volunteer hours combined per year. Volunteer opportunities range from office help to basic gardening aid to more technical horticulture assistance. There is a friendly, informal atmosphere pervading the Green Guerrilla office and gardens. There is also a hectic feeling as the organization tries to manage the needs of such a large population of gardeners. It is often the most persistent gardeners who get the most help. The Green Guerrillas does not have the resources to meet the needs of all gardeners but they give priority to economically disadvantaged people. Many Green Guerrilla gardens are located in the poorest neighborhoods.

The gardens of Alphabet City provide a good example of the role of support groups. Most of the gardens are leased by GreenThumb which prominently displays a sign in each garden. In general, gardeners agreed that GreenThumb’s help was instrumental in the beginning stages of their gardens but that they were otherwise fairly self-sufficient. Many gardeners were also in contact with Green Guerrillas. Certain gardens such as the 6th Street/Avenue B garden worked with a number of different support groups. This garden is funded and well organized. It offers an extensive array of free programs open to the public which include poetry readings, potlucks, gardening workshops and live music. The garden is unusual in the amount of community events it sponsors.

Part of the incentive in putting on public events at the 6th Street/Avenue B garden is to gain park status. If people can show that their garden is necessary for the community then it has more of a chance of being granted park status. The City of New York grants the highly desirable park status which equals permanent land protection. Gardens usually operate under one year leases which means they can be developed at any time. Variables affecting the development of a garden lot include the value of the land, the community

134 "Green Guerrillas Fact Sheet".
135 Pat Jasatis (former Green Guerrilla Staff Member), personal interview, 3 June 1996.
136 Gardeners in Alphabet City, personal interviews, 30 May, 3 June, and 26 July 1996.
138 Joel, personal interview, 26 July 1996.
support for the garden and the pressure of developers. There are many examples of gardens being destroyed for development. A recent example is the Dome garden on 83rd and Amsterdam. This successful garden existed for 20 years and was strongly supported by the community. Ironically the garden increased the value of the neighborhood which made the land more attractive to developers. The community fought a losing battle with the City. A particularly ironic twist to the story is that the City was receiving federal money to build low-income housing at the site. It is particularly difficult for community activists to have to choose between community gardens and low-income housing since both are desperately needed.

The Parks Council is NYC’s civic organization dedicated to protecting parks and open space. The Council finances a number of projects including the creation and maintenance of parks, the continuation of an urban conservation corps, and the development of community gardens in low-income neighborhoods. The organization promotes gardening by giving away free plants and bulbs to approximately 600 community groups. Another organization that helps gardeners is the Trust for Public Land which is a national group. This organization established a regional office in NYC in 1978 for the purpose of gaining permanent protection of city land. The group also helps gardeners with organizational assistance and funding for outreach programs. Both the Trust for Public Land and The Parks Council support school based gardening programs. Another greening organization is the Council on the Environment of NYC. The council was founded in 1970 and is a privately funded citizens group in the office of the Mayor. The group has 5 major programs which include a greening program. This program helps

---

139 Jasatis, 3 June 1996.
140 Jasatis, 3 June 1996.
144 Andy Stone (Staff member of The Trust for Public Land), telephone interview, 13 May 1996.
communities by providing soil, trees and shrubs to make neighborhoods beautiful.\textsuperscript{145}

Another organization that helps gardeners with technical assistance is Cornell Cooperative Extension. The extension program has been operating in NYC since the 1950s and works on community based education programs. Support for gardeners includes offering a variety of workshops and information materials.\textsuperscript{146}

In addition to support groups that work on a city-wide basis, there are organizations which are borough or even neighborhood specific. The most effective of these groups is Bronx Green-Up (BGU) which is part of the NY Botanical garden. BGU was started in 1987 and has already worked on over 300 community garden projects.\textsuperscript{147} The organization provides hands-on assistance during every phase of gardening. It provides a much needed link between the opportunities offered by GreenThumb and the development of gardens. BGU takes gardeners through the leasing process and the initial stages of creating a garden. The organization shows people how to garden and gives them supplies.\textsuperscript{148} BGU only works in the Bronx but it can be viewed as a successful model for other boroughs.

The Brooklyn Botanical garden has a neighborhood greening program called Green Bridge. The program has a less hands-on and more educational approach than BGU. Green Bridge provides information on organic growing, composting and general horticulture. The idea is to provide people with life long skills. The organization encourages community gardening by working with neighborhood associations and sponsoring a yearly contest for the greenest lot in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{149} Green Bridge keeps tract of most of the community gardens in Brooklyn. It is important to have borough specific support organizations since circumstances surrounding gardens and the needs of gardeners can differ between boroughs. There are different dynamics concerning land availability and

\textsuperscript{147} “Hail and Farewell”, Green-Up Times, Fall 1995: 1.
\textsuperscript{148} “What We Do: Working with Communities to Create Gardens”, Green-Up Times, Summer 1993: 1.
ethnicity for example between Brooklyn and the Bronx. Gardening support groups must work within the context of local dynamics.

The gardening support network in NYC differs substantially from its Austin counterpart. The most obvious difference is the abundance of groups in NYC. These groups are fairly effective in communicating with each other but they could learn from the regular direct contact between groups in Austin. On the other hand, groups in NYC have better communication with other social service providers than do groups in Austin. I was surprised at the lack of contact between Austin gardening groups and city food banks for instance. It appears that competition for funding has lead to a lack of communication between groups with overlapping interests. Cooperation could lead to increased effectiveness. I think a diversification of funding will decrease competition between groups in Austin. Support groups in NYC often rely on a wide range of funding sources. They get money from private individuals, government agencies and corporations. NYC has the advantage over Austin of a longer history and greater public recognition of urban gardening which helps funding of gardening organizations.

The difference in atmospheres between Austin and NYC has an impact on gardening support groups. There is a feeling in NYC that you must assert yourself to get anything, including gardening help. Gardeners who have the most initiative get the most resources whether it is land, gardening supplies or technical assistance. NYC support groups do not have to cultivate an interest in gardening or an ability to take advantage of gardening opportunities. The situation is different in Austin where support groups spend time educating people on the importance of gardening. There is existing interest in gardening in Austin but not a natural inclination to create a garden from an abandoned lot. Support groups in Austin have the time and need to work with communities prior to the development of a local garden. The gardens in Austin are generally larger and more organized than those in NYC but they are generally less self-sufficient.

\[\text{Jasatis, 3 June 1996.}\]
Gardening in schools

Many of the gardening support groups in NYC are involved in promoting gardening in schools. The benefits of gardening for students in NYC are similar to those benefits for kids in Austin. Students in both places enjoy being outside and can learn through the hands on approach utilized in gardening. Kids in both NYC and in Austin can learn the origins of their food and gain an appreciation of nature through gardening. Other benefits include gaining information about pesticides and other chemicals. There are also differences between gardening in schools in NYC and in Austin. It is much more difficult to have available land for gardening in NYC schools. Land is more valuable in NYC and schools are often built without extra room for gardening. Another problem for gardening in schools is the climate in NYC. Gardening is impractical for much of the school year in NYC because of the weather. Austin has a year round growing season with the least productive time coinciding with summer vacation. Schools in NYC manage to work around these constraints. Many schools utilize gardens that are off-site if land is not available at the school. There are some summer programs to cultivate gardens during school vacation.

NYC school gardening differs from Austin in that there is a greater emphasis on gardening for beautification. Certain schools have programs that only focus on non-food gardens. I did not see any gardens in Austin schools that did not grow vegetables. There are also similarities between NYC school gardens and those in Austin. NYC has the same limitation as Austin in that there is not a city-wide gardening program for schools. There is some work in groups of schools by gardening support organizations in NYC but

150 Fred Johnson (Staff member of Goddard Riverside Community Center), personal interview, 31 May 1996.
151 Johnson, 31 May 1996.
152 Johnson, 31 May 1996.
nothing borough or city-wide. There needs to be an overall application of gardening programs in schools so that every child is exposed to the many benefits of gardening.

Conclusion

Gardening in NYC provides a much needed alternative to daily life in a hectic, dirty and densely populated place. Gardens contrast with the rest of the city in their cleanliness and tranquillity. NYC gardens also reflect the city in their dynamics, ethnic composition and connection to support groups. Gardens are a critical part of the City for many low-income New Yorkers. There are many reasons these people garden, the most common being neighborhood beautification and personal well-being. The unifying factor for all gardeners in NYC is their engagement in a positive activity that improves their lives in some way.
Chapter 4 - San Francisco

**Introduction**

San Francisco is a small but densely populated city in Northern California. The 723,959 residents live in a 49 square mile radius. The city is part of a much larger metropolitan region referred to as the Bay area. The population is ethnically diverse with 53.6% White, 29.1% Asian and 10.9% African-American. Neighborhoods are generally ethnically diverse although certain ethnic groups dominate specific areas. In general, temperatures throughout the city are fairly moderate generating a year-round growing season with summer being peak time. There are climatic differences within the city; the Richmond area is foggy and cold while the Mission district is sunny and warm, which influences gardening practices.

**Community Gardens in San Francisco**

There are approximately 40 community gardens in San Francisco which are spread out fairly evenly over the city. As public access gardens, they differ from the numerous special population gardens. I started researching these gardens in a way similar to what I did in Austin and NYC but immediately noticed a major difference. Gardens and gardeners in San Francisco are supported by an incredible organization, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners or SLUG. This extremely organized, well funded and effective group uses gardening to achieve far-reaching goals for the city’s poorest residents. SLUG programs aim to achieve all of the previously discussed benefits of gardening; therapeutic,

---

155 Brian Lease (staff member of SLUG), personal interview, 11 July 1996.
neighborhood beautification, financial, nutritional, ethnic identity, community building and
the facilitation of a connection to the environment. The programs are dynamic, creative and
effective. I decided to examine SLUG in detail to better understand its approach and
determine if it could be a model for other cities.

San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG)

SLUG facilitates gardening opportunities as part of an overall philosophy of
empowering communities and individuals. The emphasis is on helping low-income people
improve their quality of life. SLUG uses gardening as a way to "sow the seeds of social
justice, community, economic development, and ecological sustainability."156 The
organization works towards achieving these goals through community based programs
with an emphasis on education and job training. There are five departments of SLUG:
Administration and Development, Youth and Economic Development, Education, Design
and Construction, and Lead Hazard Reduction.157 I focused on interviewing staff and
participants in the Youth and Economic Development, and Education programs because
these two areas most directly utilize urban gardening as a tool to empower people.

The importance of engaging youth and promoting economic development is central
to achieving SLUG's goal of transforming inner cities. SLUG has implemented creative
ways to appeal to young people and provide economic opportunities in depressed
communities. The organization engages youth through internships, school programs and
job training.158 I spoke to SLUG's executive director, Mohammed Nuru who emphasized
the importance of reaching out to young people. He thinks that much of the crisis in
America is young people who have lost their sense of direction. They need job

158Becca Prager, personal interview, 9 July 1996.
opportunities and constructive activities as an alternative to gangs and drugs. SLUG provides gardening jobs which give teens structure and a feeling of accomplishment.\(^{159}\) Most of these jobs or internships provide a stipend giving teens a much needed financial incentive to get involved. Gardening therefore becomes skills training and employment experience for young people. Gardening also has the potential to reconnect young people to culture and community. Many cultures are agriculturally based yet contemporary young people are completely disconnected from the land. The generation gap of gardeners is widening and culture needs to be reintroduced into communities while it still has a presence. Mohammed understands agricultural culture having grown up on a farm in Africa. He believes gardening can reconnect Americans to their culture and their history.\(^{160}\)

**St. Mary’s Urban Youth Farm**

Mohammed’s goal of engaging young people is exemplified in the development of an urban farm built and maintained by low-income youth. St. Mary’s Urban Youth Farm is in the process of being constructed in the Bernal Heights section of San Francisco. The Farm is located on a 4 acre site adjacent to the Alemany Housing Development. The Alemany development is one of the City’s poorest public-housing projects and the area adjacent to it was previously used as an illegal dumping ground.\(^{161}\) Now the area is flourishing with a variety of vegetables grown in neatly arranged raised beds. There are also fruit trees and plans for a greenhouse. SLUG began construction of St. Mary’s Farm in 1995 employing teens from the neighborhood for the labor. Fifty teenagers from Alemany work 20 hours a week during the summer and 10 hours a week during the school year for $4.25 to $5.00 an hour. SLUG pays the teens through a grant from the Mayor’s

\(^{159}\) Mohammed Nuru, personal interview, 10 July 1996.

\(^{160}\) Nuru, 10 July 1996.
The teens get job experience and learn new skills. They even get college credit from the City College of San Francisco for a horticulture class that is part of the program.

SLUG recruits teens from Alemany and other housing projects through door to door canvassing. Job opportunities are severely needed in places like Alemany where the unemployment rate is 84% (as compared to the citywide unemployment rate of 6%).

Kids apply for jobs and basically those who consistently show up are hired on a regular basis. There are also teens working at the site as part of a SLUG leadership program, the Youth Garden Internship (YGI) program. The work consists of hard manual tasks but the kids respond well to it. I spoke to Daniel Green who is the farm manager who has witnessed the enthusiasm of kids working at the site. He said that kids look forward to coming to work and are eager to learn new tasks. They excel in the friendly and healthy environment of the farm. Daniel believes that gardening is inherently rewarding and that it connects kids to their agricultural culture. Many residents of the housing development came from the South after the second world war when the economy in California was booming. They left the agrarian south because agriculture was being mechanized. The teens at Alemany are one or two generations away from their agrarian ancestors. Farming can reconnect them to their heritage. The hands-on agrarian experience is supplemented by the opportunity to take different classes in African-American Studies at South East Community College.

Daniel described the many benefits of teens working at the farm but he also mentioned the challenges. The most difficult part for him is teaching and organizing these

---

163 Perrigan: 8.
165 Daniel Green, personal interview, 6 July 1996.
166 Green, 6 July 1996.
teens who are new to gardening. Critical to the success of the program are supervisors who are from local communities and oversee the teens. I spoke with Luther Hawkins who is one of the supervisors at St. Mary's Youth Farm. He oversees the Green Team, a group of teens working as part of their community service requirement. These kids are doing community time for everything from cutting school to committing armed robbery. Luther exercises strict discipline over the teens to ensure that the work gets done. 

He outlines the rules and expects his crew to follow them. Luther commands respect and the kids respond to him. Luther sees the positive results that kids get through gardening work. He says that the teens get a sense of accomplishment because they can see the results of their work.

St. Mary's Farm has been well received by all age groups in the community. The amount of graffiti and overflowing trash at Alemany is almost non-existent suggesting that people are taking pride in the neighborhood. Local people are taking advantage of the free, healthy vegetables available to them. The teens plant crops such as greens and potatoes that are well liked by the predominantly African-American residents of the neighborhood. Every few weeks, teens knock on doors giving away produce to people in the Alemany development. Residents are also encouraged to pick whatever they want from the garden. Daniel pointed out that most of the garlic crop was gone suggesting that people are making use of the garden. Eventually the garden could grow enough food for 150 people. This volume of nutritious, affordable produce is rarely seen in low-income neighborhoods. The nearest "grocery" store to the Alemany housing development is a

---

168 Green, 6 July 1996.
169 Luther Hawkins, personal interview, 6 July 1996.
170 Hawkins, 6 July 1996.
171 Mesler: 8.
172 Green, 6 July 1996.
173 Green, 6 July 1996.
convenience store a block away. St. Mary’s farm is a critical step towards achieving food security for the neighborhood. It is the city’s only farm and the country’s first urban youth farm.

St. Mary’s Farm is not fully completed but it is already a success. People are investing in their community by making it more aesthetically appealing and providing food for themselves and their neighbors. SLUG demonstrates through the farm that an organization can provide support while empowering local people. SLUG plays a critical role in the development of the farm but local people are involved in every stage. SLUG staff train local people so that they can provide for themselves. Programs such as the Community Composter Training Program and the Green Garden Educator Program train residents to be gardening and composting teachers. Members of the community can then learn from each other. Future plans for the St. Mary’s project include the operation of a produce stand at the local farmers market. Teens can sell the fruits and vegetables they grow learning valuable business skills.

Other SLUG Youth Programs

St. Mary’s Urban Youth Farm is just one way that SLUG works with low-income young people. Participants in the Youth Garden Internship programs work at two other sites in addition to the farm. Double Rock is SLUG’s newest youth garden and is located at the Double Rock housing development, often stigmatized as one of the most dangerous and disenfranchised communities in San Francisco. SLUG proposed working at Double Rock during the summer of 1995 because of the many murders that were happening

---

175 Christopher Cook and John Rogers, “Food first”, In These Times, October 30, 1995, 24.
176 Perrigan: 8.
177 Nurul, 10 July 1996.
The other site is next to Juvenile Hall where teens work as part of the Woodside Landscape Internship program. Teens learn landscaping skills while beautifying the area.

SLUG integrates job skills in all its internship programs. Ten teens from the YGI crew work with the Golden Gate Park Nursery every Saturday for instance. The teens learn detailed horticulture skills in the context of a business environment. Eventually SLUG hopes the teens can start SLUG's own native plant business. Through the business, teens could learn critical job skills in addition to providing native plants to communities. SLUG's current commitment to developing business skills among low-income teens is exemplified in the Urban Herbals project. Beginning in late 1994, SLUG participants created an herbal vinegar product called Urban Herbals. Staff and teens have been selling the product at street fairs. This year Becca Prager who is the Youth and Economic Development educator expanded the Urban Herbals project. She went to business school to develop a plan to create a line of products which include 4 different types of vinegar, 3 different types of jam and 2 different types of salsa. Becca and the teens also have hats, T-shirts and mugs to sell. The teens are contacting health food stores, gift markets and other venues that support SLUG and would be interested in selling Urban Herbals. Eventually Becca hopes that SLUG will have a sustainable factory employing people to make Urban Herbals and selling them on location. The factory would be community-based giving local people a feeling of ownership.

Becca views the financial incentive as critical for appealing to teens. She emphasizes that SLUG's internships for teens are paid (except for those teens doing community service). The paycheck validates the work and gives teens an alternative way to make money besides selling drugs. Surveys of the SLUG teens show that they spend the

---

179 Becca Prager, personal interview, 9 July 1996.
180 Prager, SLUG Update: 15.
181 Prager, SLUG Update: 14.
182 Becca Prager, personal interview, 9 July 1996.
highest percentage of their paychecks on clothes and food. They are proud that they can buy things with money that they have earned. Teens make less money from SLUG than they would make selling drugs but the tradeoff is worth it. Teens know the risks and dangers involved in drugs and would rather earn less money in a legitimate way. Becca can tell endless anecdotes of teens who just needed the opportunity to make something of themselves. SLUG provides that opportunity and teens develop self-confidence and pride in their community in addition to a much needed paycheck.¹⁸³

I spoke with some of the teens who work with SLUG. Benica Adams is a 16 year old African-American girl who has worked with SLUG for two years. She said that she feels different spending money that she has earned herself, “...when I do get the fast money it didn’t feel good spending it. But now when I get my check I take my time spending it and it feels good. Every time I buy something to put on my back or eat it feels good spending it.”¹⁸⁴ She said that her SLUG income helps people while money from drugs hurts people, “...I know there’s a difference in death money and money that I worked hard for, because the kids on the street selling dope to other kids...Little do they know they steal and kill somebody or they killing someone, but me I know I’m helping someone.”¹⁸⁵ Benica helps people in her neighborhood by growing food, “...the food that we give out to the community that we grow, I know that the kid that didn’t eat dinner last night is going to have something to eat...because we’re going to go to the house and maybe give them a basket of food or tell them to come on down and pick whatever you like or whatever. It was a big change in my life.”¹⁸⁶

Benica appreciates the fact that SLUG has given her a chance to stay away from the gangs and drugs that destroy many of her peers, “I thank God for SLUG in a way because it has kept me alive for the last two years which I know I would not have been so, I

¹⁸³ Prager, 9 July 1996.
¹⁸⁴ Benica Adams, personal interview, 9 July 1996.
¹⁸⁵ Adams, 9 July 1996.
¹⁸⁶ Adams, 9 July 1996.
probably been dead or in jail. You know, like my twin brother." Benica has met kids from other neighborhoods which has helped her survive in the climate of violence. She has worked with teens from different turfs, "...I can go work with them and not be able to be scared and do like I don’t want to work over there and be killed or something. Now we know each other so when we go to school—it’s all the togetherness." Benica likes the environment of working in the garden. She feels that the garden is healthy and she likes learning about her food. Benica only eats fresh food now, "I know not to eat it unless I grow it or something. Like I don’t buy foods or anything from a store anymore. I will eat - I can’t think of the name (organic)." Benica’s changing view of food is echoed by Becca’s experiences with other teens. Becca says that most of the teens had not been exposed to fresh produce prior to working at SLUG. There are older women, primarily grandmothers from the South who cook fresh vegetables but cooking seems to be disappearing with each generation. Becca said that many of the teens do not recognize fresh vegetables such as broccoli because they have never seen them growing. They get excited to learn that they can cook something that they have grown themselves. The teens also learn to appreciate the nutritional value of vegetables through gardening. Becca said that they are more apt to order a salad at McDonalds now. The SLUG teens are learning about diet and nutrition in a familiar cultural and economic context. Becca also sees how gardening gives low-income teens a greater appreciation of the natural environment. There was a teenager from Alemany, for instance, who worked on native plant restoration and then began recognizing types of plants in his everyday life. There are numerous other stories of young people’s perceptions of the natural world changing because of their gardening experiences. Benica’s thoughts on gardening reveal

187 Adams, 9 July 1996.
188 Adams, 9 July 1996.
189 Adams, 9 July 1996.
190 Prager, 9 July 1996.
191 Prager, 9 July 1996.
a deep connection to the natural environment, “I mean it’s digging here, working hard and knowing you’re actually doing something to make the earth better.” Critical to the success of experiences at SLUG is the fact that teens like Benica work in their communities. 70% of SLUG program staff work in the communities in which they reside. Youth programs are started in a given area after SLUG has already worked in the community and built up trust. SLUG staff meet with local people to get a sense of their needs which is usually employment. In this way, members of the community feel invested in SLUG projects before the projects occur. Benica said that when the community is not involved there is more vandalism at the garden. The manner in which SLUG staff supervise contributes to the feeling of community ownership. Benica feels like the SLUG employees are fully supportive, “They’re there for us a hundred percent... They’re like a friend but a friend that is giving you work to do. Like Beth, I can take orders from her and not be insulted or something like that. But if I were to go to another job, I wouldn’t like it.”

**SLUG Education for Adults**

SLUG has many other education programs in addition to those aimed at low-income teenagers. There are SLUG special population gardens geared towards seniors,
students and other groups of interested people. SLUG staff members work with schools that contact them but there is no district wide or city-wide program. Mohammed believes that schools and institutions should have control over where their food comes from. Students should be able to meet the farmer who grows their food. Mohammed hopes that in the future every school will have a garden. He is currently working with the GAP clothing company to develop a farm where their employees will grow food for the company cafeterias. GAP workers will learn about their food and feel connected to nature through the project. Mohammed is also interested in City wide education about composting. He is frustrated by the amount of food waste and sees large scale composting as a viable solution.197

SLUG works with schools by providing educational gardens that teachers can visit with their classes. I spoke with a 5th grade teacher, Carolyn Germacelli who has brought her students to SLUG's Garden for the Environment. The garden is located near Golden Gate Park on 7th Ave and Lawton Street. Carolyn finds the garden extremely useful for her class. She is strongly supportive of SLUG and their use of gardening as a tool for teaching multiple issues.198 The Garden for the Environment is a public education garden for people of all ages. There is information posted throughout the garden identifying plants and flowers. There is also a detailed description of the various stages of composting and information on pest control. Information is printed in many different languages including Russian and Chinese at the Garden for the Environment. People come to the garden as volunteers but also as part of various programs including drug rehabilitation, mental health and school to work transition programs. There is also a group of volunteers which grows food for a local homeless shelter at the Garden for the Environment.199

I spoke to Odin Zachman who supervises volunteers at the Garden for the Environment. Odin is SLUG's Green Garden Educator Training Program (GGETP)
coordinator. He coordinates a program that trains approximately 20 people in composting and horticulture skills. Participants learn the value of less toxic gardening and gain the skills to teach other people in their communities. They are required to do a community outreach project as part of the course. In addition to coordinating the GGETP, Odin works with volunteers who come to the Garden for the Environment for a variety of reasons. People come for the therapeutic benefits and also for required community service. Many people work off parking tickets for instance, through an innovative alternative sentencing option. These people are able to fulfill a requirement in addition to making an area more beautiful.²⁰⁰

When I volunteered at the Garden for the Environment, I interviewed some of the other people working there. Rich works at the garden to practice horticultural skills in the hopes of opening his own business some day. He also finds gardening work a necessary therapeutic escape from normal city life.²⁰¹ Denise works in the garden as part of an elective class for the California Institute of Integral Studies. She wanted to get involved with SLUG because of their focus on community. Denise feels that she is contributing to her community and learning about composting through the Garden for the Environment.²⁰² I also spoke to a man who was working off his parking ticket and wanted to remain anonymous.²⁰³

The Garden for the Environment is one of SLUG’s many special population gardens. These gardens combine with public access gardens to give SLUG a comprehensive approach to urban gardening. This situation differs from that of New York City where gardening support groups usually work with either public or limited access gardens but not with both. SLUG’s approach lends itself to easy communication between people involved in overlapping facets of urban gardening. Community gardens and special population gardens for instance, differ in many ways but also have much in common.

²⁰⁰ Zachman, 11 July 1996.
²⁰² Denise, personal interview, 11 July 1996.
People working in these two areas can be effective by sharing ideas. In addition to working with different types of gardens, SLUG combines membership, internships, education, technical assistance and lead removal. Mohammed characterizes the multi-issue organization as a "one stop shopping center". SLUG's many issues are united with a clearly articulated philosophy. Gardening has the power to transform individuals and communities and everyone in a democratic society should have the opportunity to garden. SLUG facilitates gardening opportunities by building neighborhood gardens, providing supplies and conducting community leadership training. The goal is to give people the tools to help themselves. SLUG programs are community-based which is critical to their success.

Economic development is necessary for empowering low-income communities. People need the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. Gardening is an ideal way for people to obtain affordable, healthy food. The challenge is convincing low-income people to garden. For many struggling people, gardening seems like an added worry. Too often, the very people who should garden are not the ones doing it. SLUG offers incentives for low-income people to garden. The organization connects the vital issues of nutrition, food security, urban beautification, job training and community development. SLUG empowers people with education and employment. Mohammed describes the role of SLUG as one of background support, "...we have been on the sidelines, especially behind the scenes making things happen." The community is the driving force and SLUG supports the community. Mohammed works to ensure long term sustainability of SLUG projects. A critical factor for any gardening efforts is the permanency of land. SLUG is discussing the idea of having zoning for community

---

204 Nuru, 10 July 1996.
205 Nuru, 10 July 1996.
206 Nuru, 10 July 1996.
207 Nuru, 10 July 1996.
gardens with the land department. SLUG has never lost a public garden to development which contrasts with the situation in NYC.

Community Gardens

SLUG's community garden coordinator, Brian Lease keeps tract of San Francisco's 40 community gardens. He checks in with the local coordinator of each garden on a regular basis and helps out when there is a problem. Brian is careful not to be too involved in specific gardens so that gardeners do not become dependent on outside support. He puts in time at the beginning stages of a garden when infrastructure help is required.208 SLUG believes that people take good care of community gardens because they feel ownership of them. This situation differs from parks for instance which are generally not treated well by residents. People do not feel personally responsible for parks so they trash them. The attitude towards gardens is fundamentally different. People feel responsible for community gardens.209

There is much variety in size and physical environment in community gardens in San Francisco. Undeveloped land in the City is fairly rare making it difficult to plan uniform gardens throughout the City. There are gardens as small as 200 sq. ft. and as large as 10,000 sq. ft.210 The number of gardeners is also highly variable. There are lots with as few as 2 cultivators and as many as 200.211 The number of people gardening changes from year to year making it difficult to present absolute numbers. The climate as mentioned earlier also creates variability between gardens. Soil conditions, wind and

---

208 Lease, 11 July 1996.
209 Nuru, 10 July 1996.
211 Glasner: 55.
sunlight vary between areas. I visited many of San Francisco’s community gardens and interviewed gardeners.

The largest age group of gardeners is seniors. The two most common reasons for gardening are obtaining fresh vegetables and gaining therapeutic benefits. This situation differs from NYC where neighborhood beautification was the primary reason for gardening. A possible explanation for the difference between the two cities is that San Francisco is less densely populated and more aesthetically pleasing than NYC. There is less incentive to grow solely for neighborhood beautification. As far as San Franciscans interest in fresh vegetables, I think the year round growing season and the large Asian population could be an explanation. Californians are used to getting fresh produce because their climate allows it. New Yorkers on the other hand, have a long winter leaving them the choice of buying frozen vegetables or paying more for fresh produce shipped in. The large percentage of Asians in San Francisco could also contribute to the widespread interest in freshness among gardeners. Asians traditionally rely on fresh produce for their cooking.

Within the category of therapeutic rewards, most gardeners named a sense of accomplishment they received through gardening. Other therapeutic benefits included interaction with nature and physical exercise. For many immigrants, gardening is a way to preserve their ethnic identity. There are many immigrants in San Francisco and gardens often reflect ethnic pride. I did not witness the flags and symbols present in NYC gardens but ethnicity was present in other ways. People grow plants that reflect their ethnic background. Many Asian and Latino gardeners grow specialty produce that they can not buy in stores. Saving money was mentioned by a fairly small percentage of people as a reason for gardening.

Brian sees public gardens in San Francisco as helping facilitate community cohesiveness among residents. There are many different ethnic groups which mix with

---

212 Community gardeners, personal interviews, July 6-12, 1996.
213 Community gardeners, July 6-12, 1996.
214 Community gardeners, July 6-12, 1996.
each other because they have a garden in common. New friendships develop as do problems between people. There are sometimes bitter ethnic problems between gardeners. Brian sees the garden as a microcosm of problems in society. The difference is that in the garden people have to interact with each other and hopefully learn to get along. In general, gardens serve to bring neighbors together. Other observations from Brian’s experiences include immigrants and seniors being the most common type of gardener and food production being the most common reason why people garden.215

In addition to my interviews, I also relied on information from a thesis on the history of community gardening in San Francisco by Alice Gwen Glasner of San Francisco State University. Alice’s work was recommended to me by a number of people. She visited all 40 community gardens on numerous occasions during a year period between 1986 and 1987. Alice conducted a formal survey of 77 gardeners using defined methods.216 Her findings were consistent with my anecdotal research.

SLUG’s Vision for the Future

SLUG’s promotion of community gardening is part of its larger goal of community self-sufficiency. Mohammed envisions people growing and selling food in their local neighborhoods with profits going back into the community. SLUG can be a catalyst to achieve this vision. Food security, community development and green space are interconnected. Mohammed is pushing for San Francisco to develop a food council similar to the one recently created in Los Angeles. The council unites a variety of groups together to discuss issues of food. In addition, Mohammed thinks that every city agency should have a department of food. He has a legislative goal of passing the food security act. This act stipulates that public transportation has to reach food centers, that food stamps or other

215 Lease, 11 July 1996.
public assistance vouchers can be used to purchase organic produce and that people have access to fresh organic food at local grocery stores.\textsuperscript{217}

Mohammed is pushing for a national movement based on urban gardening. The movement would be structured on a grassroots level but have a national presence. It could apply pressure on Congress for instance. Mohammed thinks that Congress could start appropriating money directly to urban gardening groups instead of going through state and regional offices. Currently HUD funds much of the urban gardening efforts through community development block grants. Groups are getting money from the same source yet they have to apply in different ways according to their location. A national gardening movement could facilitate greater and more direct federal involvement. Mohammed believes that the government should help citizens and be accountable to them. He said that taxpayers have a right to know why open space is not being used appropriately, for example. If the government cannot deliver than citizens should know what they can do to make things happen. Government bureaucracy responds to citizen action. Education is critical because many people do not understand their rights as citizens or the value of their resources. Gardening groups should look at these larger issues and focus on the bigger picture.\textsuperscript{218}

Mohammed sees far reaching possibilities for SLUG and the urban gardening movement. He has just developed a business plan which entails production, greenhouse operations, manufacturing and even going into clothing. The plan takes into account employees needs such as on site day care.\textsuperscript{219} Mohammed and SLUG illustrate the potential of urban gardening to transform inner cities. His vision shows that there are potential solutions to the complex problems of urban poverty. There are other gardening support groups in San Francisco but none that have the comprehensive approach of SLUG. The other support groups focus on specific aspects of urban gardening such as Catherine

\textsuperscript{216} Glasner: abstract.
\textsuperscript{217} Nuru, 10 July 1996
\textsuperscript{218} Nuru, 10 July 1996.
Sneed’s group which works on gardening in the prison system. These groups work with specific populations.

Conclusion

Urban gardening in San Francisco differs from efforts in Austin and New York City because of the city’s unique support network. SLUG is the only group I encountered in these cities that offered a comprehensive model for transforming inner cities through gardening. SLUG has a long term vision and is working towards achieving that vision. Support groups in Austin have a similar philosophy to SLUG in that they connect gardening to food security but their programs and resources are minimal in comparison. Groups in New York City provide thousands of gardeners with much needed assistance but efforts are divided between many different groups. Certain gardening advocates argue that a diversity of groups is more beneficial for a city such as NYC. Groups have different niches and no one group has total control. I agreed with this theory until I visited San Francisco. SLUG proves that having a central gardening support group can be the best situation for a city. The critical question is whether SLUG could be used as a model for other cities.

---

219 Nuru, 10 July 1996.
220 Jasatis, 3 June 1996.
The Five Benefits of Community Gardening

It is clear that community gardening has multiple benefits for low-income, urban residents. The most commonly articulated benefit was therapeutic enhancement. People, regardless of their city, described in different ways how gardening made them feel better about themselves and their lives. I was surprised to discover the widespread importance of these intangible benefits. Before starting my interviews, I had assumed that therapeutic rewards were secondary to the practical benefit of obtaining inexpensive, healthy food. I was especially surprised at the therapeutic impact of gardening on specific age groups. I met more elderly people than any other group and they consistently emphasized the central role of gardening in their lives. Community gardening gives elderly people a sense of purpose and self-worth. It also provides a much needed forum for interacting with other people and a way to exercise.

The other age group which responds particularly well to gardening is children. Kids learn life-long skills and enjoy themselves through gardening. They develop self-confidence and a sense of responsibility which is especially critical for low-income children who have limited opportunities. Schools provide an excellent context to introduce kids to gardening. I was surprised to find a lack of district-wide or city-wide gardening programs. SLUG succeeds in reaching youth in their communities but does not reach them on a school-wide basis. I hope that in the future, gardening programs in schools are expanded so that more students are exposed to the critical activity. Gardening support groups could work more with district officials to implement gardening activities on a large scale. Groups could provide materials and assistance to teachers who could infuse gardening related activities into their classes.

In addition to therapeutic benefits, neighborhood beautification was the second most frequently mentioned benefit of community gardening. People were proud that they could
aesthetically improve their area. As discussed earlier, neighborhood beautification was a more prevailing benefit for people in densely populated cities such as New York City. The nutritional benefits of gardening were not frequently mentioned by gardeners yet they existed. I was surprised at the depth of knowledge among low-income, urban gardeners about the dangers of pesticides. People clearly understood the nutritional benefits of organic produce. Surprisingly, financial benefits were not frequently sighted by people as a reason for gardening. Gardeners acknowledged the fact that growing food saved them money but they did not name economics as a primary motive for gardening.

Ethnic identity was an important benefit of gardening for many low-income, urban people, especially those who had recently immigrated. For them, gardening reminded them of their childhood’s spent in rural areas. Gardening was a way to reconnect to their past. Gardens reflected the ethnicity of gardeners in the types of vegetation planted and in the presence of decorations such as Puerto Rican flags and ceramic Madonnas in Alphabet City. The ethnicity of certain groups of gardeners was more prevalent than others. I saw many gardens with a strong Latino influence, especially in New York City. People were speaking Spanish, listening to Spanish music and cooking Burritos or other Latin food. In San Francisco, there are more gardens with a strong Asian presence. Different Asian languages are spoken and vegetation is planted that is not found in stores.

**Community Building**

Gardening facilitates community building but does not transcend existing tensions. Most gardeners agreed that gardening promotes interactions among neighbors who would not otherwise have a context for interaction. The garden is a common area of interest and a forum for communication. On the other hand, tensions within the community are often manifest in the garden. People fight with each other over a variety of topics related to the garden such as water use and choosing a spokesperson. Ethnic tensions and personality
differences are the most common reasons for problems in gardens. Usually the positive aspects of the garden overcome these problems and almost everyone agreed that problems between neighbors would be worse without a community garden.

**Environmental Identity**

My original hypothesis was that gardening facilitates the creation of an environmental identity among low-income people. I am still not able to scientifically prove it but evidence from interviews overwhelmingly supports this hypothesis. For many people, gardening is their only outdoor activity. Most people, especially children, mentioned being outside as a major benefit of gardening. The widespread knowledge of pesticide dangers is further proof of the existence of an environmental identity among gardeners. People know that the biological process of growing is adversely affected by industrial chemicals. Gardeners develop other ways to protect their gardens from pests. These alternative methods often involve detailed knowledge of the environment. People give careful thought to their plants and the environmental factors that affect their growth. In addition to chemicals, people pay attention to soil quality and weather conditions. Gardening is the primary way that many people interact with the natural world.

**Comparison of Gardening Support Groups**

SLUG offers a comprehensive approach to urban gardening but could the SLUG model work in Austin or NYC? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to look at the conditions that make SLUG possible. San Francisco is a fairly small, temperate city known for its liberal atmosphere. Residents of the city support progressive causes through their politics, financial contributions and general attitude. The liberal atmosphere of San Francisco is conducive to the development of an organization such as SLUG. Individuals, corporations and politicians help SLUG achieve its ambitious goals. People city-wide are supportive of the organization. I met residents of many different ethnic and economic
backgrounds who were not directly involved with SLUG but were familiar with it and expressed their support. I did not encounter this general endorsement of an urban gardening group in Austin or New York City.

I think that the SLUG model could be applied in Austin. Support groups such as the SFC could implement many of SLUG’s programs while adapting them to their local context. In order for it to work, the SFC would need a dramatic increase in funding and more widespread support from city residents. Austin has the climate, available land and need for a SLUG style approach.

NYC provides a more challenging context to implementing the SLUG model. The conditions in NYC are dramatically different from those of San Francisco. NYC has roughly 10 times the number of people as San Francisco and a different growing season. It would be difficult to have a central organization in NYC that provided assistance to thousands of gardeners without being a huge bureaucracy. SLUG works because staff members are flexible, enthusiastic and in constant contact with each other. I think the nature of the organization would change if it attempted to meet the needs of so many more gardeners. Another major difference between NYC and San Francisco is the climate. The fact that NYC does not have a year round growing season affects the applicability of the SLUG model. Internships and other employment opportunities could not happen outside during the New York winter.

The SLUG model could not work in the same way in NYC but it can still be useful for NYC support groups. NYC has the same problems as San Francisco in terms of unemployment, disenfranchised communities and racial strife. Groups such as the Green Guerrillas and Bronx Green-Up could learn from SLUG’s youth internship programs for example. There are available land and plenty of troubled youths in places like Harlem and the Bronx for the SLUG program to work. Of course funding would be a challenge but this obstacle is not insurmountable. The most critical pre-condition for any SLUG program to work is the involvement of the local community. Green Guerrillas staff for instance, would
have to establish trust and mutual respect with people in the community before implementing any type of internship program. From my experiences in Alphabet City, I think that there are already positive connections between low-income gardeners and gardening support groups but these would have to be strengthened. Instead of merely having good relations between staff and local gardeners, there should be staff who are local gardeners. SLUG works because it is comprised of the very people it aims to empower. There is little delineation between the people helping and the people being helped.

Conclusion

Gardening improves the lives of people of all ages, ethnic backgrounds and income brackets. It is one of the few activities that enhances people's lives without endangering their future. Gardeners achieve multiple benefits for themselves without jeopardizing the natural world. The challenge is figuring out how to realize the potential of gardening in large urban centers. SLUG programs provide successful examples that can be emulated and adapted to other cities. The effectiveness of SLUG shows that solutions to the urban crisis are possible.
Bibliography

Books, Articles and other Printed Material:

1990 United States Census Report

Fitzgerald, Kate. "Food for thought", letter to the editor, Austin American-Statesman. 7 June 1995.
Editorial. "East Austin residents have few food sources", La Prensa. 22 April 1995.

---

221 The census has five categories of race; White, Black, American Indian or Eskimo or Aleut, Asian or Pacific Islander and Other. Hispanic is part of “Other” because it is not defined as a race. I calculated the number of Hispanic or Latino people in each city by adding the different types of Hispanic people (Black Hispanic, White Hispanic, etc) together and using that number to determine the percentage.
222 People quoted from the exhibit; Tito Arroyo, Julio Baret, Martha Hinton, Brian Howard, Benny Jacobs, John Kelly, Julie Kirkpatrick, Lucille Laird, Lucinda Martinez, Gertrude Rainey, Tony Rodriguez, Benjamin Saurez, Virginia Spruill, Annie Thompson, Michael Webster, Jesus Velazquez.

Interviews:

Adams, Benica. Personal interview, 9 July 1996.
Baggio, Margaret. Personal interview, 18 April 1996.
Brooklyn gardeners. Personal interviews, 3 June, 4 June and 26 July 1996.
Cruz, Ofelia. Personal interview, 17 April 1996.
Denise. Personal interview, 11 July 1996.
For, Olena. Personal interview, 30 May 1996.
Fuller, Frank. Personal interview, 18 April 1996.
Germacelli, Carolyn. Personal interview, 12 July 1996.
Gilbert, Dan. Personal interview, 26 July 1996.
Green, Daniel. Personal interview, 6 July 1996.
Hawkins, Luther. Personal interview, 6 July 1996.
Jasatis, Pat. Personal interview, 3 June 1996.
Joel. personal interview, 26 July 1996.
John. Personal interview, 3 June 1996.
Johnson, Fred. Personal interview, 31 May 1996.
"Jose" is an anonymous gardener in Alphabet City. Personal interview, 30 May 1996.
Lawson, Hortense. Personal interview, 19 April 1996.
Lease, Brian. Personal interview, 11 July 1996
Nuru, Mohammed. Personal interview, 10 July 1996.
Peterson, Eric. Personal interview, 18 April 1996.
Peterson, Eric. Telephone interview, 21 November 1996.
Prager, Becca. Personal interview, 9 July 1996.
Schreibman, Lisa. Personal interview, 29 May 1996.
Scribner, Samantha. Personal interview, 17 April 1996.
Stone, Andy. Telephone interview, 13 May 1996.
Zachman, Odin. Personal interview, 11 July 1996.