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Cultivating more than food: Where community gardens fit with what cities do

Response #3 to Hallsworth and Wong's viewpoint, "Urban gardening: A valuable activity, but…"

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Hallsworth and Wong's viewpoint (2013) asserts that urban gardening, and by extension, other local food initiatives (farmers' markets, etc.) are insufficient strategies to replace the quantity and efficiency provided by contemporary globalized food systems for supplying cheap food to the (urbanizing) masses. We agree.

Urban gardening, on its own, is not a panacea for addressing food insecurity in urban settings. At current production levels, it can only supply a small fraction of the food needed for urban residents. However, the value of urban gardening and other alternative food initiatives (e.g., farmers' and pocket markets, good food box programs, etc.) goes beyond simply providing food. As the authors note, the city of Vancouver considers urban gardens to be beneficial public spaces that allow citizens to connect with nature, facilitate the consumption of supplemental levels of fresh food, encourage physical activity, and strengthen social relations (see also Alaimo, Reischl, & Allen, 2010; Ober Allen, Alaimo, Elam, & Perry, 2008; Turner, Henryks, & Pearson, 2011; Wakefield, Yeudall, Taron, Reynolds, & Skinner, 2007).

There are many examples of urban gardening from Detroit, Buffalo, Seattle and Milwaukee (among others), cities where land is much more

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available, that suggest that it is a viable use of urban space, particularly in low-income urban communities with limited access to fresh produce through traditional grocery store outlets (Atkinson, 2012; Broadway, 2009; Metcalf & Widener, 2011). While some cities, such as Vancouver and Toronto, struggle to find available land for extensive urban gardening, they are also becoming increasingly inventive with land use of marginal space (e.g., brownfields), and there is a growing interest in vertical agriculture in order to increase production capacity (Ehrenberg, 2008; Iverson, Holmes, & Bomke, 2012).

Toward the end of their piece, Hallsworth and Wong ask what civic governments can do to improve food security in an urban setting, and this represents both a critical question and challenge.

Within British Columbia and elsewhere across Canada, local food and urban agriculture initiatives are supported in local planning and policy documents, with more formalized food systems planning approaches finding their way into official community plans and regional growth strategies (Donald, 2008). By embedding local food strategies within wider frameworks, cities and city-regions are, by intention, taking action to address climate change, sustainability, and quality-of-life imperatives.

These plans, initiatives, and innovations acknowledge the connection between food and other civic priorities that relate to economic development, tourism, greenhouse gas reduction, waste management, protection of green space, health, wellness, and culture. They represent a less piecemeal approach to land-use development and recognize the food system as an important urban system (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999).

The growing need for community gardens provides added evidence to the ways in which local governments are reacting to issues that increasingly fall at their doorsteps but are often beyond their jurisdiction (in B.C., the reduction in provincial welfare eligibility, as one example) and how these responses are framed, i.e., through a poverty reduction framework (via community gardens, food banks, etc.), or through a different one (e.g., Vancouver's Greenest City initiative), or both.

Thus, community gardens in particular, and alternative food initiatives more broadly, have larger effects than simply providing food. While they may not enjoy the efficiencies and economies of scale of traditional retail, alternative food initiatives contribute numerous other place-based benefits that large-scale systems are not able to accomplish. Whether through providing space for social interaction and residents with access to and control over a small portion of the fresh food they eat, or teaching children about where food comes from, and greening otherwise unused and derelict spaces, community gardens support social goods that meaningfully benefit the health and well-being of cities and their citizens.

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