

No buts about it...The value of urban food production

Response #4 to Hallsworth and Wong's viewpoint, "Urban gardening: A valuable activity, but..."

Evan Weissman
Syracuse University

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In their provocative essay, Alan Hallsworth and Alfred Wong (2013) contend that academics, activists, and policy makers exaggerate the benefits of urban food gardening. They state: "There is no basis to expect that [urban gardening] could ever deliver fresher food and/or lower cost foods." The authors attempt to explain the shortcomings of urban gardening as a food security strategy by highlighting its barriers in Vancouver, Canada, especially the climactic obstacles to production in northern regions and the age-old real estate adage of "highest and best land use" that precludes urban food production. Hallsworth and Wong's assumptions could not be more incorrect, and rather than simply stoking debate, the authors unwittingly provide fodder for the detractors of urban agriculture, of which there are many. Indeed, urban gardening plays a significant role within the city as public

space, as an economic development strategy, and as a community-organizing tool. Most importantly, urban food production contributes to household food security. To cite just one example from my own research: a ½ acre (0.2 ha) urban farm project in Brooklyn, New York — East New York Farms! — produces over USD20,000 of fresh produce annually in a neighborhood defined by disparities in fresh food access. Over 70 percent of the farm's transactions are made through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (i.e., food stamps), meaning that fresh produce is reaching community members in high need (personal interview with East New York Farms manager, June 15, 2010).

The essay fails to convince precisely because it relies on false assumptions and narrow understandings of urban gardening. Hallsworth and Wong acknowledge the value of only the "personal enjoyment" of growing food and the "socializing" benefits of community gardening. The authors suggest that urban gardening has some redeeming productive capacity, but not for "most people" who believe that "greater [food] security flows from food that is in some way local." Certainly it is

Evan Weissman, Assistant Professor of Food Studies, Department of Public Health, Food Studies, and Nutrition, Syracuse University, The David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, 304 Lyman Hall, Syracuse, New York 13244-3240 USA; +1-315-443-4295; eweissma@syr.edu

a mistake, the authors explain, to think we can “return to the days of ‘growing (all) one’s own food.’” Yet nowhere in the essay do Hallsworth and Wong justify these assumptions. Urban food production is re-emerging in complex and contradictory ways throughout North America. The growing movement is not predicated on false hopes of its productive potential, but recognizes urban cultivation as one of many approaches to address inequalities in the conventional food system.

Hallsworth and Wong are correct to suggest that urban agriculture is driven in part by agrarian nostalgia and they rightly draw attention to the limitations and contradictions of urban gardening, including “systemic obstacles” such as competing land uses and capital-intensive models that continually undercut the expansion of urban food production. But they overlook the real material impacts of urban food production for marginalized people engaged in it. Hallsworth and Wong altogether ignore the importance of a growing grassroots effort to cultivate the city as a means to democratize the food system.

The authors advance an all-or-nothing approach to urban agriculture. If the entire food needs of the city cannot be met through urban agriculture, farmers’ markets, and the nebulous “local” food, Hallsworth and Wong contend, then why practice urban agriculture at all? To be sure, there are limits to urban agriculture and a comprehensive approach to food system reform is necessary. Municipal governments, for example, can and should do much more than encourage urban gardening as a tool to improve a city’s food system, and food justice activists need to engage directly in political struggles to challenge the hegemony of capitalist

agriculture. In fact, the authors could have made a stronger critique of urban gardening had they focused on some of the apolitical tendencies within the broader movement and the ways in which state support for gardening efforts work to (re)produce neoliberal forms. Neither a political economic critique nor a full recognition of the limitations of urban gardening, however, negates the overall importance of urban food production. Instead, urban gardening should be understood in historical context and appreciated as part of a larger overall strategy to build just and resilient urban food systems. As one Brooklyn, NY farmer explains:

The question is not: Can New York City feed itself? That’s not the point [of urban farming]. We can grow healthy food aimed at reaching the folks who need it the most while building a strong local economy. We can empower, challenge, and build (Personal interview, February 28, 2010).

Urban agriculture both contributes to household food security and helps cultivate a critical consciousness of the conventional food system. This consciousness could bring about other types of changes to the food system. Growing food in the city is an important tool in the struggle for food justice and, if expanded, has the capacity to do much, much more.

Reference

Hallsworth, A., & Wong, A. (2013). Urban gardening: A valuable activity, but... *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 3(2), 11–14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2013.032.010>