

Community gardening during times of crisis: Recommendations for community-engaged dialogue, research, and praxis

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Abstract

Using ongoing reflections from our recent work as members of a community gardening initiative, we

outline relevant priorities for researchers, policy-makers, and community practitioners to examine the role of community gardens in addressing the effects of COVID-19 on the lives of intersectionally diverse growers. To understand how COVID-

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19 has influenced the practices of community-led urban agricultural spaces, we suggest that future efforts take into consideration three essential areas of focus: uses of community gardening in combating food insecurity during a pandemic, changes in community garden operations in response to crises, and community gardening's role in nurturing emotional well-being.

Introduction

How do community gardens—as spaces to grow fresh and nutritious food—respond to a pandemic socially, politically, and culturally? This essay is informed by the work of a range of stakeholders connected to *The Village Community Garden and Learning Center*,¹ a community garden initiative in Rochester, Minnesota. After introducing our project, we outline three areas of interest to growers, community organizers, students, researchers, and other stakeholders navigating COVID-19's effects on day-to-day operations. We hope that our perspectives encourage conversation among individuals and groups working in projects where food, community gardening, and collective wellness intersect. We also address challenges from the pandemic and our efforts to build new practices that empower our communities.

A Bit About *The Village*

Most of the growers participating in *The Village* live in housing where they do not have access to a garden or larger areas of land,



Left to right: Olivia Allen-Winkler, Kim Sin, Amanda Nigon-Crowley.

(Photo by Chris Allen)



Collard greens and melon trellis.

(Photo by Amanda Nigon-Crowley)

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/TheVillageCommunityGarden/>

yet they want to grow commodities native to their homeland that they can sell in their communities and at local markets. As an organization serving gardeners from marginalized communities, *The Village* strives to find urban growing spaces with the necessary elements: parking and access to the city bus route, water, and access to a restroom. The gardeners are assigned their own plot to manage for the growing season at no cost (unless they can donate to help with expenses). The organization's steering board seeks local funding and grants to support operations. The gardeners show a willingness to work together on special projects and with the coordinators in managing aspects of the garden. All of the work conducted and produced by *The Village* (such as this essay) centers on the intersectionally rich perspectives of our growers (totaling over 130 heads of households, with over 90% representing non-European, non-Anglo ethnic and racial groups), a steering board (whose membership is around 50% non-European White), as well as the garden's leadership, composed of an academic principal investigator (PI) and community co-PI who represent the two largest communities of growers in the garden—Mexican and Cambodian, respectively.



Summer squash.

(Photo by Amanda Nigon-Crowley)

A Community Garden at a Time of Crisis

Our ongoing conversations as board members, growers, and activist-scholars have highlighted possible issues for further exploration by those looking at the role of community gardens during pandemic times. These spaces can not only provide access to fresh food but also support the collective well-being of racially and/or ethnically minoritized groups and individuals navigating moments of crisis. While these insights are not representative of an agenda that would benefit a more mainstream community gardening audience, we see the importance of our perspectives as highlighting broader social inequities arising from the pandemic, as well as the role of community gardens as possible spaces of social transformation.

The Role of Community Growing Spaces to Grow and Supplement Food During the Pandemic

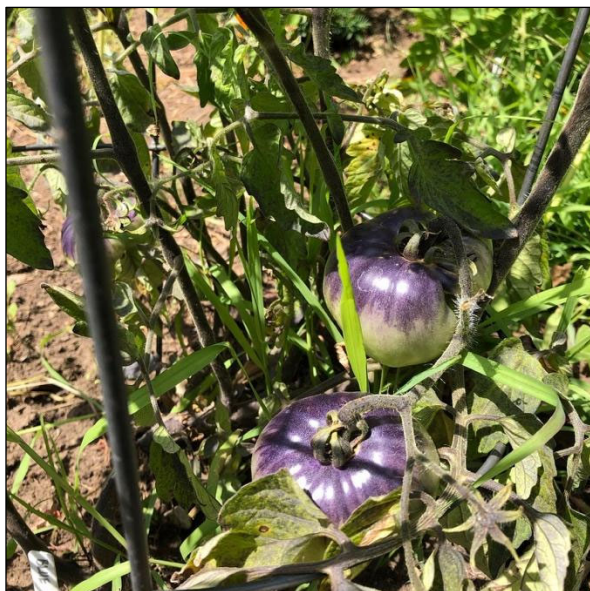
Community gardens and other spaces can help families weather pandemic-related economic losses by supplementing their diets with nutritious foods (Lal, 2020). In light of the ongoing crisis, what are community gardens' roles in the experience and possible alleviation of individuals' and groups' food insecurity? Using data from a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, Gonzales and colleagues indicated that families have responded to bouts of pandemic-triggered food insecurity by spending less on groceries, with more than one-third of these having difficulties affording food in addition to other basic needs (2020). Since community gardening has been one of many strategies used by people to access much needed nutritious food, those working in similar initiatives are well positioned to explore how different community garden growers address food insecurity emerging from COVID-19 induced economic issues.

Although the adjustment of supply chain practices has mitigated the bare shelves we saw early in the pandemic, maintain-

ing access to culturally specific food can be difficult for communities of color and immigrants during moments of crisis (Aronson, 2014). Due to employee sickness, store closure, or supply interruptions, small businesses that sell “specialty” food items essential to culturally specific habits are especially at risk. Limited shipping from other countries of specialty crops and additional quarantine requirements have limited supplies and increased the cost of these foods (Gray, 2020). Furthermore, immigrants use community gardening to maintain social and food traditions (Hartwig & Mason, 2016). Our community board members have shared growers’ worries about their ability to access culturally specific produce if grocery stores were to close during this or the next wave of this pandemic. Researchers and practitioners alike should examine how community gardening, on a larger scale, may improve access for both gardeners and the greater community to culturally diverse foods during COVID-19 interruptions.

Community Gardens: Pivoting and Responding to COVID-19

The Village has responded to COVID-19 in different ways. During the 2019 growing season, *The Village’s* garden plots were assigned at about 75% capacity but were only utilized at about 65%,



Purple heirloom tomatoes.

(Photo by Amanda Nigon-Crowley)

leaving an acre of land without food production. During the 2020 growing season, which coincided with the pandemic’s beginning, the plots were at 100% capacity, with additional growers wait-listed. We also had to develop safe, social-distancing protocols that were linguistically and culturally relevant to our growers. *The Village’s* steering board strategized to allocate additional growing space as the number of gardeners increased due to our regional food pantry’s diminished capacity and an increase in the number of people seeking space to grow.

Growers state that the produce from the community garden supplements their food supply and provides places to grow produce from their native countries. Also, several of our growers have asked for increased capacity to grow for their families and to sell in local markets, while others are looking for ways to raise livestock. Many of the long-term growers have stated that the community garden, as a whole, looks better than it has in the past. They have shared that the garden has provided an aesthetically pleasing space (in addition to the other forms of support they have received from our garden coordinator and volunteers since the pandemic began) during a chaotic moment in time. Our steering committee is looking for ways to support our gardeners further as they navigate the pandemic.

Community gardens (and the desire to grow one’s food) have blossomed over the last decade. Still, the pandemic advanced this desire so significantly that most seed companies temporarily stopped taking orders in spring 2020 so they could catch up with demand. Locally, this occurred at our Seed Library at the Rochester Public Library, and regionally at seed houses within 100 miles of Rochester. To meet the increased demand for growing food after Minneapolis’s calls for justice in the wake of George Floyd’s death, in addition to COVID-19, newly created organizations sought donations to supply community gardens with seeds and vegetable transplants in food-insecure and low-income areas. While some growers were starting seeds and planting, the need for community gardens such as ours has expanded.

Our local food bank, which serves the broader southern Minnesota region, could not distribute

fresh food and could not take fresh vegetable donations, significantly limiting access. Other food banks, such as the one serving local university students, had to change operations and work on procedures and guidelines for staff before accepting donations from *The Village*. This created a gap in services for many people who relied on assistance to meet their food needs.



Winter melons.

(Photo by Amanda Nigon-Crowley)

Community Gardens as “Beyond Food” Spaces

Individuals are currently experiencing a loss of connection and increased isolation from COVID-19 stay-at-home orders (Berg-Weger & Morley, 2020; Vannini, 2020). Community gardening increases social capital, social support, and social connectedness (Kingsley & Townsend, 2006). Participants see them as spaces to connect and socialize with others outside their social networks and improve their sense of cohesion. In some communities—especially after trauma, disaster, or tragedy—gardening has been used to promote healing. Examples of this include gardens established by survivors of Hurricane Katrina, refugees after immigration (Bailey, 2017), the community garden established in Christchurch, New Zealand, in response to the earthquakes (Shimpo, Wesener, & McWilliam, 2019), and, most recently, citizens in

North Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd (Townsend, 2020). As we start working to collect qualitative and quantitative data on how our gardeners benefit from *The Village*, we encourage others to map out and share how growing spaces in their localities are helping various communities, both mainstream and minoritized.

Community gardens such as *The Village* continue to provide communities, especially those multiply marginalized, to maintain existing connections. Via the link to other gardeners—even when these interactions occur in a socially distanced fashion—we have noticed that ownership of plots has provided social and emotional support during the pandemic. Our ongoing ethnographic forays and exploratory interviews with gardeners show that *The Village* has provided much-needed space for well-being during great stress. First, *The Village* has become a place that offers gardeners a healthy social activity during COVID-19, while so many people have idle time due to unemployment or being furloughed. Also, the garden has allowed for the strengthening of social relationships between new and existing gardeners. Finally, we have observed that our community gardeners have benefited from the support of the coordinators, volunteers, and members of the steering board.

Growing Together

In this essay, we outlined three areas of interest to researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders working in small-scale agricultural initiatives as they respond to the pandemic’s effects on their communities. In highlighting possible points of exploration that address the ongoing challenges community gardening projects face from COVID-19, we seek to stimulate conversations on these spaces’ role for minoritized communities as similar health crises threaten their relationship to food. COVID-19’s unpredictable effects do not make it impossible to plan and map how community gardens and similar-positioned initiatives might creatively respond to issues of access, consumption, and the role of food and small-scale growing initiatives in pandemic times. In closing, we propose that food and community are essential nexuses for building new social justice practices and envisioning a new

normal. In light of the barriers and pressures experienced by our community gardens during crises, we are inspired by the possibilities that these sites can nurture transformative visions that go beyond resignation to a “new normal” into developing ways of building stronger community bonds through collective growing spaces.

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Left to right: Anna Oldenburg, Kim Sin, Elena Arsentyeva, and Amanda Nigon-Crowley.

(Photo by Cosmas Nyatwori)

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