JOURNAL BRIEF: Understanding the Social Benefits of Community Gardens in East Harlem

This brief is adapted from the following peer-reviewed journal article: Petrovic, N., Simpson, T., Orlove, B., & B, Dowd-Uribe. (2019). Environmental and social dimensions of community gardens in East Harlem. Landscape and Urban Planning, 183(2019), 36-49.

Study Intent and Research Question
This study is motivated by an interest in understanding whether an ecosystem services perspective on community gardens (heat island mitigation, food cultivation, etc.) can be combined with attention to the other potential benefits of gardens such as social cohesion. This study focuses on two questions: (1) what are the basic characteristics of community gardens in East Harlem, New York City, and (2) what are the social and environmental factors that affect place attachment to gardens? This study measures physical aspects of 35 gardens as well as gardeners’ self-reported experiences, considering community gardens in the context of urban green infrastructure along with parks, green roofs, street trees, and bioswales.

Key Background Information
Community gardens take various forms: planted flowers on vacant lots, collections of individual garden plots, etc.

Motivations for community gardening articulated in existing literature include: local food production, increased healthy food consumption, social engagement, ecosystem service provision (e.g. heat and flood mitigation), civic engagement and collective efficacy.

There are examples of gardens facing redevelopment pressure that have galvanized local community coalitions and political action in opposition to redevelopment.

Community gardens are sometimes read as “temporary” sites, which can make them particularly susceptible to development pressure.

In East Harlem, there are 1.2 acres of open space per 1000 residents, which is below the recommended threshold of 2.5 acres (New Yorkers for Parks, 2012).

Key Findings
Garden Participation and History:
--Gardens are a part of weekly life for many gardeners: 39% of participants stated they had come to the garden seven or more times in the previous week while 43% stated that they visited one to three times.
--Most gardeners live near the gardens: 54% live on the same block, 80% live within two blocks, and 96% live within eight blocks.
--Many of the gardens have been neighborhood fixtures for years. 40% of the gardeners reported visiting the gardens for more than ten years.
--Cumulatively, gardeners contribute thousands of hours of unpaid work each year maintaining the gardens.

Fresh Food and Ecosystem Services:
--Growing food was stated as important for 98% of gardeners (strongly agree: 77%, agree: 21%). Many garden members indicated that growing food gives them a sense of ownership, connection, and responsibility.
--A majority of the gardeners indicated that garden produce is a weekly staple at their dinner table during peak season. However, the actual quantity of vegetables in such meals is relatively small: <15% stated that most of the produce they eat comes from the garden.
--Gardeners themselves generally did not discuss benefits in terms of ecosystem services, beyond viewing the gardens as places to cool off on hot days.

Social Connectedness:
--A large majority of participants indicated they know their neighbors better because of the garden and that they see
people in the garden that they would not otherwise see. 
--A large majority of gardeners indicated they know the 
names of most of the people in the garden and that they 
often talk with people they know. 
--Generally, the gardeners who visited gardens more fre-
quently were older. Some older gardeners discussed the 
importance of the social support system gardens provides.

Place Attachment: 
--A majority of garden members reported a strong connec-
tion to, and satisfaction with, their respective gardens. 
--Positive place attachment was associated with social con-
nectedness. Attachment was strong among gardeners who 
say they know neighbors better because of the garden, 
as well as among those who say they know the names of 
other garden members. 
--Physical garden features were not associated with higher 
or lower levels of place attachment among gardeners. 
Almost half of garden members indicated insecurity regard-
ing the future of the gardens and reported thinking their 
garden will likely be taken away in the next ten years.

Policy and Practice Implications 
Increased fresh food access or ecosystem services need 
not be the only, or primary, policy motivation for gardens.

The social connections that gardens foster may be an 
equally (or more) important policy rationale for supporting 
gardens as part of neighborhood green space.

Protections against the sale and redevelopment of garden 
sites may need to be provided directly by the city or in part-
nership with non-profit and/or quasi-public entities.

Multiple garden types can support social connectedness 
goals. There is no a priori policy reason to support one type 
of garden configuration over another if the motivation is to 
support social connectedness.

Because gardeners directly manage community garden 
sites, their values should be taken into consideration when 
decisions are made about public support and resources for 
gardens.

Further Reading and References 
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Corresponding Author: Ben Orlove, Columbia University, bso5@columbia.edu

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