

**Analysis of the Benefits of
Community Gardens in the Lower
East Side**

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Introduction

Community gardens have served as a beacon of growth within the Lower East Side for the past 50 years. With over 75 community gardens in the Lower East Side alone, community members have ample opportunity to find a garden that they would like to invest in. I have conducted a survey amongst community garden members to get a gauge on the benefits of these gardens specific to the Lower East Side, and compare these results to previous literature on the topic.

Background

Each of these gardens have historic backgrounds, each following a similar arc, but still maintaining their individuality. Many of these gardens were established in the late 1970s, a time when the Lower East Side was not as affluent as it is now. Many plots in the Lower East Side had buildings that were left abandoned or burnt down. New York City was unable to keep up the maintenance of these run down plots and members of the community began to use some of these plots for more nefarious activities. At this time, the famous Green Guerilla group was created, led by community member Liz Christy. Green Guerilla members used to throw horse manure and seeds into these vacant lots in efforts to have something green grow. Eventually, the City of New York began to lease the land out for \$1 a month, marking the formal beginning of these community gardens.

As these community gardens began to get bigger and bigger, getting more beautiful along the way, they became increasingly involved in local and city politics. As the property value of these gardens skyrocketed, more developers began to turn an economic eye towards them. Under the mayorship of Rudy Giuliani, 63 parcels of land were ready to be auctioned off to a private

land trust, the Trust for Public Land, for a price tag of \$3 million. In a drastic move, private money was used to purchase these gardens to keep them open to the public. Organizations such as the Manhattan Land Trust took charge of many of these gardens and have continued to manage them to this day. Currently the gardens are facing new regulations from the City of New York, which in turn has received mixed reactions from garden members.

Past Research

There has been much research done around the world on community gardens. The research shows that the main motivations for developing these community gardens includes: to consume fresh foods, to promote social development or cohesion such as community building and cultural exchange, to improve health among members and to make or save money by eating from the garden or selling the produce (Guitart et. al). Other less common, but still important, motivations include: to educate, to enhance cultural practices to access land, to enjoy nature, to promote environmental sustainability and to enhance spiritual practice (Guitart et. al). Another interesting finding in these papers includes benefits such as biodiversity being mentioned by authors, but rarely demonstrated in practice. There has been research that has shown that gardens provide a space for physical exercise for visitors, such as a daily walk or exercise through gardening (Petrovic et al). Consistently throughout the literature, the unifying feature of community gardens is that they are *community* gardens. They serve as a basis for community bonding and a social space for people to visit.

The role of community in the community gardens is extremely complex, with a necessity to clearly define the sense of community before launching a discussion on this topic. In Firth et al., communities are socially constructed by people who are looking to interact with a common

purpose. We can apply this to gardens as they can serve as a space where a community of people can come together and interact for the sake of the garden. This has been cited as a great place for people of different ethnicities to come together and interact (Firth et. al). Finally, in these communities, it is said that new social networks can emerge where people can feel more included in a circle of people (Firth et. al).

I found a necessity to conduct my project for there is no research done on the gardens in the Lower East Side. Because there has been so much research done in other community gardens, there are many different results that cannot be directly applied to the Lower East Side. Conducting this research will help see the specific benefits of the Lower East Side and see how that compares to other gardens around the world.

Results

In an open section of the survey, where participants were asked to share what they felt was the greatest concern with the garden, a large amount of the participants responded that city politics was their number one concern. Many gardeners talk about a contentious relationship with the city, especially with the Parks department. Some participants delved into the complexities of the relationship, including one participant who stated, “The city [is] pressuring our garden to sign a lease when [there] are some areas we don’t agree [on]”. Other general sentiments include there being too much bureaucracy and fear of gardens being taken away by more lucrative replacements.

Another general area of concern is the age of gardeners and the need for younger gardeners. The age of the participants ranged from 40-79. Many participants explicitly stated that the number one concern for gardens was a need for younger volunteers. Past research has stated

that gardens often serve a physical benefit, such as exercise. Around 46% of participants were either neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the garden is an important place to get exercise.

The survey also inquired about the relationship amongst garden members. To begin, around 13% of garden members disagreed or strongly disagree with the statement that they are satisfied with how board meetings are run. Another 17% of participants were neutral with the statement above. Additionally, 40% of participants disagreed or strongly disagree with the statement that 'board meetings are effective at governing the gardens'. In response to the statement, 'I have made close ties with other board members', 43% of participants either said they were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagree with that statement.

Finally, the survey also provided some logistical data from garden members. In response to how often people came to visit the garden, 16% say they visit the garden 5+ times, 32% say they visit the garden 4-5 times a week, 36% say they visit the garden 2-3 times a week, and 16% say they visit the garden once a week. Additionally, Saturday and Sunday were the two most visited days, followed by Monday and Thursday, with the least popular day being Friday.

Discussion

The concerns raised about lack of youth in these gardens via the open response has certainly been validated with this numerical data. A lack of youth in these gardens is certainly alarming for the future. In a time where new city regulations are causing uncertainty in the future, having someone invested in the future would be incredibly beneficial. Many gardens host open events to draw in younger community members, such as concerts to poem readings to

programs with organizations like Biobus. However, it should be noted that even with these actions, many young people are not joining the administrative end of these gardens.

One of the main benefits provided by the gardens, as stated in other research, is that it helps create a community amongst garden members. From my results, we do see some people who feel that they are making more connections in these gardens. However, there is also a contingent of people who do not feel this way. This should be a concern for gardeners, because a big part of the role of these gardens is to be inclusive and create a community. Community gardens need to do more in order to foster relations between members. One place to start, in response to a suggestion to a comment left by a participant, is to break down language and cultural barriers. This can be done in many ways such as having events where people of any cultural background can participate and feel welcomed. An interesting example of this was in a garden where a program educated gardeners about the ‘three sisters’ method of farming, sharing Native American farming with others.

Finally, one of the most important findings from the survey was the response to the question of what participants find more important to these gardens: the community aspect of bringing together people, or the gardening aspect. Participants were split almost evenly between those who believed in the community aspect of things and those who believed in the gardening aspect of things. This is important for the community members to know as it shows the people want both out of their gardens. In my research of the many gardens in the Lower East Side, many gardens have chosen to focus on one or the other: either having many personal plots or no personal plots at all. It is extremely important that gardens strike a balance between the two or they risk alienating any one group.

In the end, community gardens serve as a great way to bring together a community and break down social, economic and political barriers. In troubling times with increasing bureaucracy, decreasing membership, and increasing logistical troubles, the love that the garden members have for these spaces serve as a pillar to support these spaces

Fact Sheet

- 35 people participated in this survey with 34 being garden members.
- **74% of participants agree or strongly agree that board meetings are effective in running the garden**, 26% of participants are either neutral, disagree or strongly disagree that board meetings are effective
- **77% of participants agree or strongly agree that they made close ties with other garden members**, 23% of participants are either neutral or disagree with that statement
- 94% of participants agree or strongly agree that the gardens increase their pride in the neighborhood
- 97% of participants agree or strongly agree that the garden is an important space to them
- 54% of participants agree or strongly agree that the garden is an important place for them to get physical exercise. 46% of people are either neutral, disagree or strongly disagree with that statement
- Participant **age ranged from 40- 79 years of age**
- The amount of years people have been coming to the garden **range from 1 year to 45 years**
- 14% of participants come to the garden 5+ times a week, **31% come 4-5 times a week**, **34% come 2-3 times a week**, 20% come once a week
- **39% of people visit the garden most frequently on Sunday**, **26% on Saturday**, 13% on Thursday, 10% on Monday, 7% on Tuesday, 3% on Friday and Wednesday
- **54% of participants live 1-2 blocks away from their community garden**, **26% live 3-5 blocks away**, 14% live 7+ blocks away, and 6% live 5-7 blocks away.

Select Quotes

In response to the question, “What is the number one challenge that your community garden is facing today?” [Note: select responses only]

- “The same handful of committed members take on all the work in organizing and running the garden...Many of the committed gardeners are over [the] age 50. We need younger adults to join in these gardens to help not only with physically exerting tasks, but also to take care of the environment that they and their children will be inheriting.”
- “Too much bureaucracy”
- “Language and cultural barriers”
- “Keeping it forever and not being replaced by an extra building”
- “The city pressuring our garden to sign a lease when there are some areas we don’t agree. Any mistake a garden can lose its garden.”
- “ Developers with money”

In response to the question, “Please share anything else you would like to” [Note: select responses only]

- “The garden exists for community benefit through the medium of horticulture creating an environment of quiet contemplation. The objective is human health and regeneration at the individual level. This, in turn, hopefully benefits the community as a whole.”
- “We want to garden, not run mini-corporations.”
- “I hope that more ecologically minded community members will join these gardens to help educate citizens about the importance of helping not only local wildlife thrive, but also the many migrating species that use these urban gardens to navigate up and down the Atlantic flyway.”
- “Both community and gardening are equally important.”
- “I came to the garden as a way to deal with the side effects of chemotherapy. It still soothes my soul and feeds me spiritually to put my city hands in dirt and eat what I plant and care for. I’m so grateful for this garden and the friends I’ve made.”
- “It's one of the only areas in the city where an affluent person and a poor person from the neighborhood can meet on common grounds and chit chat.”

Works Cited

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