

Exploring Community Gardens in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Strathcona Neighborhoods



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LFS 350

Executive Summary

By incorporating sustainable food system principles and core values learned from the Land, Food, and Community series, this project aimed to explore motivation behind community garden establishment, as well as indicators of accessibility, in community gardens in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Strathcona neighbourhoods. The project aimed to provide a deeper understanding of to what extent community garden objectives coincided with the City of Vancouver's *Food Strategy* goals, and to examine their position within the local food system. Inquiry questions such as "What are the motivations behind community garden establishment?" and "How does each community garden group manage its accessibility?" are examples of questions asked of research participants that framed the interview process.

The methodology included interviews with the garden organizations that met the inclusion criteria and were obtained through the City of Vancouver's online resources. Interviews were conducted with community garden coordinators by the student research team and the conversations were later transcribed for analysis. Findings were analyzed using a "grounded theory" inspired approach to identify common themes and compare results (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). The results included motivation for establishing a green space and connections with nature, as well as opportunities for community empowerment and engagement. Results regarding indicators of accessibility found that gardens' membership application process was either perfunctory or entirely non-existent; and all garden representatives expressed garden commitment to inclusiveness. All four-community gardens surveyed in the Downtown Eastside and Strathcona were demonstrably aligned with many of the City's *Food Strategy* goals.

Exploring motivations and indicators of accessibility for community gardens, as well as their position within the food system, provided a better understanding of the role they play in their respective communities, and the greater community at large. The team proposes that the City of Vancouver gather more empirical evidence regarding community garden food production and community development to evaluate their effectiveness in fulfilling the *Food Strategy*'s stated goals.

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I. Introduction

1. Background & Context:

The *Vancouver Food Strategy* (VFS) embodies goals that aim to create a “just and sustainable food system for Vancouver,” built upon years of food system initiatives and grassroots community development, by the City of Vancouver (2013, pp.1). As students concerned with issues surrounding community access to affordable, healthy, and culturally-appropriate food, the team chose to survey two of Vancouver's neighborhoods through the use of the neighborhood food asset, community gardens (CGs). By utilizing concepts from the Land, Food, and Community Series, this project aims to explore aspects of the VFS through motivations behind CG establishment, as well as indicators of accessibility within Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) and Strathcona neighborhoods.

2. Significance

The City of Vancouver (2013) considers CGs to be important community food assets, as they have the potential to improve local food security and foster a sense of community in their respective neighbourhoods. According to the VFS, food assets are defined as “resources, facilities, spaces, or services that are available to Vancouver's residents at the city-wide or neighborhood scale used to support city's food system” (2013, pp.2). The project's aim, to better understand and explore the conditions of CGs within Vancouver, coincides with the city's Food Strategy goals to “improve and expand upon knowledge regarding local food resources” (2013, pp.2). This project's framework is based off the VFS' second goal, “to empower residents to take action,” as well as the priority action of this goal to expand the accessibility of these resources.

3. Systems Diagram

Figure 1. Community Garden Systems Diagram



Community Garden Systems Diagram

A hierarchical systems diagram was deliberately not chosen, as it would not accurately represent historical and contemporary relationships between community gardens, the neighbourhoods they're embedded within, and the city government. CGs in both Vancouver and other cities have often been established by "grassroots" organizations in opposition to institutional powers, such as municipal governments, park boards or developers. Only in recent decades have cities begun to recognize the benefits of CGs and formalize relations with them, for example, through the VFS (2013).

The City of Vancouver sets operational guidelines for CGs which are on city land (n.d.), but neither establishes nor manages CGs; non-profit societies- collections of concerned or interested citizens- propose the establishment of a CG to the City. After gaining approval and a five year lease, the group is responsible for managing that garden and its membership. The City also supports CGs through the City's *Food Strategy*: it considers CGs to be essential "food assets", which should be made available to all residents. The City interfaces with CGs and their non-profit societies through other means as well, though such interactions have not been listed here for reasons of brevity; this diagram however should make it clear that these interactions are not necessarily top-down, but rather more egalitarian in nature.

4. Limitations to Methods

Limitations to the project's methodology include the short time frame within which the project is being held. This time constraint could provide a challenge to being as detailed as desired. Another limitation to the method is the small sample size being studied (DTES and Strathcona). This sample may not be representative of all the CGs in Vancouver, and therefore findings cannot be generalized to the entire CG population.

5. Project Objectives

The project's main objectives are as follows:

- Interview CG coordinators about motivation behind garden establishment and strategies to improve accessibility to gardens.
- Draw common themes from interview findings and discuss results to better understand the role CGs play in Vancouver's food system.
- Propose questions and recommendations regarding CGs for further research.

6. Inquiry Questions

The project's inquiry questions are as follows:

1. What were the motivations behind CG establishment?
2. How does each CG group manage its accessibility?
3. Do the goals of CGs coincide with the goals of the VFS?

II. Methods

1. Data Collection Approach & Procedure

A list of CGs in the DTES and Strathcona neighbourhoods was compiled using information provided on the City of Vancouver's website. CG information was limited to garden name, location, and

contact details. A total of ten CGs were located in the two neighbourhoods of interest, two of which did not have email addresses or telephone numbers listed (Oppenheimer Park and Grass Roots). The other eight gardens were contacted using semi-personalized emails briefly introducing the research team, research goals, and a request for an interview. Of the eight gardens contacted, four gardens responded and were willing to be interviewed. Sarah Commons of Hives for Humanity, represented Hastings Urban Farm and Hastings Folk Garden, Lenn Kidd represented Cottonwood, and Martin Borden represented Strathcona. Interview questions were generated by the research team prior to all interviews, and were based on the project inquiry questions. The three interviews, generally 40-50 minutes, were conducted within each garden's respective space using a voice recorder. Consent forms were provided and signed before interviews and recordings began. Afterwards, interviews were transcribed for qualitative analysis.

2. Analysis

Data analysis was inspired by *grounded theory*. Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach where data is first collected, then coded to identify themes (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). However, due to logistical constraints the team did not use coding, and instead expanded on two key themes common among all transcripts. The first theme was motivation for garden establishment, including green space and community building. The second theme was indicators of garden accessibility, focusing on empowerment of patrons and engagement with the community through promotional strategies. For analysis, the themes were compared and contrasted between gardens, assessed in comparison to the goals of the VFS, and evaluated for Asset-Based Community Development principles.

3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were based on privacy, respect, and awareness of CG organizations and their patrons.

- The team must not pressure garden coordinators to divulge private information about garden patrons if not comfortable.
- The team must not allow their presence to negatively affect the comfort of the garden coordinators or patrons.
- The team must be aware of possible preconceived ideas and assumptions about the neighbourhood organizations and respective gardens, and not allow them to influence actions, decisions, or writing.

III. Results

1. Motivations

When questioned about motivation behind establishment of their respective CG, coordinators had varied responses but discussed similar themes. For example, three of the four gardens stressed the desire to turn under-utilized city space into productive green space. Cottonwood, although created as an extension of Strathcona garden, was similar in that it promoted green space in protest to development of the then-proposed Malkin Ave freeway. The Folk Garden differed as its founders' intent was to provide the community with a space of "green respite" through a medicinal garden. Three of the four gardens' stated motivation was to connect the community with nature by providing a green space within the city.

Hastings Urban Farm also desired to create "low-barrier" access to green space in order to increase accessibility. In connection to wanting green space, two of the four gardens' (Hastings Urban Farm and the Folk Garden) core motivations were rooted in food security for the respective

neighbourhoods by providing access to sustainable, healthy, and culturally appropriate food sources. All the gardens expressed interest in creating community empowerment and engagement opportunities through their programs. Both the Urban Farm and Folk Garden explicitly expressed goals of creating a space of inclusiveness, safety, and dignity.

2. Indicators of Accessibility

All interviewed coordinators addressed the importance of accessibility and inclusivity in their gardens. All four gardens are run with an open door policy and expressed the importance of no discrimination regarding membership. Cottonwood and Strathcona have a two-step application process that requires individuals to attend a work party, and submit an application involving fee payment. Both Cottonwood and Strathcona also keep a waitlist; however, the turnover of participants is high. Hastings Urban Farm and the Folk Garden have no application process or wait-list.

Unique promotion strategies to improve accessibility were observed at all CGs. Two out of four gardens maintain an active social media platform for community outreach. In addition to social media, Hastings Urban Farm partners with neighbouring community centers and uses social resources to inform the community about opportunities at their garden. They also provide an honoraria for the first ten gardeners that show up to their drop-in gardening sessions, as an incentive to engage more people. Other promotional strategies stated by the CGs were using notice boards, renting out space to third parties for events, and hosting various cultural/educational/festive events.

IV. Discussion

1. Motivation

All of the CGs that were interviewed employed Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) strategies when establishing their gardens. Their motivations were to utilize marginalized city land to provide green space to their respective communities. For example, Cottonwood emphasised creating the

garden to protest infrastructure development of the land as one of their motivations. It appears that all four of the gardens wanted to make use of a space, that would otherwise not have been used, for the benefit of the surrounding community.

Out of the five goals that constitute the VFS, these gardens cohesively meet four of them. The goals include: (1) support food friendly neighborhood, (2) empower residents to take action (3) improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally diverse food for all residents, and (4) make food a centerpiece for a green economy (City of Vancouver, 2013). Reasons for establishment for all four CGs fulfill the first goal, which is to support availability of sustainable and healthy food in the neighborhood. The Hastings Urban Farm and the Folk Garden fulfill the second goal of empowering residents to take action through connections to local food and community based systems. Both these gardens heavily focus on providing citizens opportunities to take part in growing food and prioritize vulnerable communities. In terms of the third goal, Hastings Urban Farm gives out honoraria on certain days as payment for work on first come first serve basis, and a share in the produce that is grown for all volunteers. This initiative allows residents more access to food, which contributes to food security. Additionally, the Urban Farm fulfills the third goal of the VFS by providing garden plots to specific organizations, allowing them to grow culturally appropriate crops. Hastings Urban Farm exemplifies “creating food-related green jobs” (City of Vancouver, 2013), an aspect of the fourth goal, by providing honorariums to members in exchange for their garden work.

2. Indicators of Accessibility

In exploring accessibility of CGs in DTES and Strathcona, the four garden's promotion strategies and application processes were examined in relation to the City's *Food Strategy* goals. These indicators of accessibility were found to meet two of the five VFS goals: (1) to improve access to food for all residents and (2) empower residents to take action. (City of Vancouver, 2013).

In relation to the first goal, all four CGs were observed to have diverse promotional strategies to increase their accessibility. One of the priority actions listed in the VFS is to make the application process “more clear and accessible” to all individuals (City of Vancouver, 2013). As Hastings Urban Farm and Folk Garden do not have application processes, anyone is welcome to become involved with the gardens. It is worthwhile to consider that not having an application process could potentially increase CG accessibility. All four CGs also relate to the second VFS goal. Strathcona and Cottonwood engage members to take action in their community, through required attendance of monthly work parties. Additionally, Hastings Urban Farm provides honoraria as an incentive for community members to partake in garden tasks, while also developing skills related to growing food.

3. Limitations of Study

The main limitation of the study was sample size. Since only four gardens were included in the sample, the generalizability of the findings is likely low. Additionally, there is a risk of non-response bias in the sample. This bias suggests that coordinators who responded to the email agreeing to take part in the project may differ from those who did not. For example, it is possible that gardens who value accessibility and inclusion would be more likely to respond to inquiries about CG accessibility, which would skew results. Further limitations of the project included logistical constraints to grounded theory approach analysis, which limited interpretations by not coding transcripts (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Similarly, the short time frame of the school term provided limitations to methodology, data collection, and analysis.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research project has found that a fundamental motivation of community gardens in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Strathcona neighbourhoods was to create and establish productive green space for the benefit of local communities. Moreover, these community gardens strove

to empower members to grow their own food, connect with nature and engage with their community. Furthermore, the four community gardens all expressed the importance of inclusiveness and openness within their garden spaces, and employed various means to do so, such as not requiring an application or waiving membership fees. Such motivations and efforts for accessibility align well with the stated goals of the *Vancouver Food Strategy*, though it is not known to what extent the gardens connect with the fifth goal, to have or can advocate for a “just and sustainable food system” (City of Vancouver, 2013). Recommendations for the City of Vancouver would be to incorporate more quantitative data of food production and community development to evaluate how effective community gardens are at fulfilling the City's *Food Strategy* goals. Overall, this research project has provided valuable insight into community gardens as community-based food assets in the Downtown Eastside and Strathcona, as well as creating dialogue for future research on food assets in collaboration with the City of Vancouver.

Critical Reflections

“M” - Land and Food Systems Community Series has enabled me to build trusting and lasting relationships amongst my group members as well as the capacity to contribute to a group dynamic in my own unique ways. In applying principles from Asset-Based Community Development, I have learned about reassessing beneficial resources, such as community gardens, where the city can convert under-utilized public space and liabilities into assets that contribute to our society and existing food network. These concepts help me to understand the city's actions in regards to the Vancouver Food Strategy in addition to addressing issues of food insecurity within British Columbia. As we were one of the groups to create our own projects, we found a challenge lay in the structuring of the project, which cut into the time for data collection and analysis in the short time frame of the term. This challenge affected how much ground we were able to cover within the short time frame of the semester. The flexible learning time in this course was crucial to our project's success as we needed to meet as a group to articulate project goals, complete blog posts, organize our project, conduct data collection, plan presentations and write the proposal and report. However, based on the amount of work associated with a group project and all the related assignments, it would have been advantageous to have more flexible learning periods especially near the end of term when all the final assignments are due.

“M” - The LFS 350 course provided a valuable opportunity to plan, organize and carry out a complete CBEL project. As a group using the Vancouver Food Strategy, we had to start with common interests in order to create research question. Our initial interests and rough research questions went through a lot of refinement and adjustment after obstacles during our project. A major change in our project was moving from interviewing CG members to just the CG coordinators. This was due to various factors like time constraints for example. As one of the members who got to personally interview one of the CG coordinators (Sarah Commons for Hastings Urban Farm and Hastings Folk Garden), I was able to

experience first hand a sustainable food system in action. The interview with Sarah provided valuable and useful information, and was something I really enjoyed. The one thing lacking, as mentioned previously, was not being able to focus on interviewing CG members themselves. I believe that interviews with CG members would have allowed us to get an in-depth perspective of their experience of accessibility of sustainable food assets. Since community gardens as for the community, interviews of the CG members could have been a rich source of information in respect to how community gardens help them connect to food and community, if it does at all. For the next CBEL project that I embark on, whatever research question that may be, I would like to focus on the community itself and their experiences with food and community.

“M” - The LFS community based experiential learning project has given me the opportunity to explore community food security at a local level by furthering my knowledge of the role of community gardens in Vancouver. In relating our project to the Vancouver Food Strategy, I also learned about the action plans set forward to improve food security in the city as well as the food assets and initiatives that are currently in place. Being given the flexibility to choose our own topic of interest in relation to the Vancouver Food Strategy has been exciting, but also eye opening to the challenges associated with visualizing and initiating a new project from scratch.

Flexible learning experiences were beneficial in providing the time where all group members were able to meet and discuss, amidst our busy schedules. The online platform was also beneficial for the progress of our project. The blog posts had questions well suited to each stage of the project, and allowed the group to continuously move forward despite time restraints and numerous changes in the scope of our project since our initial proposal. It provided the opportunity for us to come together to reflect and reassess our objectives and goals of the project.

“M” - Among the many things I learned from the LFS CBEL project, one of the most significant to me was understanding the importance of being aware of preconceived notions of certain populations when doing research. In the beginning stages of the project, our group chose to focus our research on the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver because of our preconceived notions of the marginalized people who lived there. However, we soon learned that despite having good intentions, it was unethical and unhelpful to approach research with unsupported notions of groups being disadvantaged. I now understand that acting on assumptions, such as the residents of the Downtown Eastside being disadvantaged, can add to stigmatization and have potential negative outcomes.

With the support of the LFS 350 teaching staff, our group changed the frame of our project to include all populations as equals, and remove any polarizing statements about certain groups. As a result of this experience, in the future I will ensure to think critically about any judgement I may be passing on a population before deciding to interject and offer my efforts, both for potential future research topics, and in everyday life.

“M” - Our group experienced some challenges with the topic of our project. The initial idea was much different than what the final report became. We struggled with translating our vision into a project that could be used to further knowledge and the flexible learning proved important during this time. Once we finally determined an idea we felt passionate about, we experienced some challenges with the logistics of the project. It was fortunate that we had the lecture on scope change at the same time that the group was feeling discouraged about the success of our project. We were able to speak to our ever helpful T.A., Josh, and reignite the inspiration for our project. In the end, the project was better than we anticipated. This course and CBEL project taught me that just because we experienced a difficult start, did not mean we couldn't achieve a strong finish, and a graceful dismount.

“D” - After this research project, I’m left wondering about the fundamental benefits of different garden types. As the 4 CGs surveyed for our project were quite unique, I wondered what more “typical” CGs in Vancouver were like, and if they provided the same benefits to their communities. As both Strathcona and Cottonwood provide gardening and communal space for such a large number of community members, and Hives for Humanity has created a space that strives for inclusiveness and understanding, I question whether or not “cookie cutter” gardens (like those found in Olympic Village or other new residential developments) can provide the same level of benefits to their community. If not, is setting aside land for that express purpose the best way to serve a community, or could something else be put in its place that would deliver services/benefits more effectively? Perhaps a CG is not always the best use of space in a particular community, depending of course upon the intent and desired outcome; maybe a community centre, a retirement home, or a condominium with an internal vertical farm would better serve a particular community. I ask these questions not to criticize the work of so many urban gardeners, activists, and organizations- I think they’ve done tremendous work- but rather to question the assumed utility of *all* community gardens, as if they were all a homogeneous bunch.

References

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