

Community Gardens in Vancouver: An exploration of communication, food sovereignty, and activism

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 2015

Extended Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the

School of Communication (Dual Degree Program in Global Communication)
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Summer 2016

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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

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Abstract

This research project used Claire Nettle's analysis of community gardening, using social movement theory to assess whether Vancouver community gardens may be places of activism, in particular in raising understanding of and sympathy with the food sovereignty movement. Organizers of five community gardens were interviewed about their garden's communication practices. The findings were to be similar to some of what Nettle found in her research. Community gardens are mixed spaces where some practices can be called activist, and others not. All of the gardens struggle with the issues that many volunteer-based organizations face. All of the gardens were seen by participants as public spaces which can not be isolated from the larger community, whether it is the neighbours or various visitors. This suggests that community gardens in Vancouver can be places where people practice acts that would support the food sovereignty movement in Canada.

Keywords: community gardening, activism, food sovereignty, social movements, communication practices.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the interviewees who were the most generous of guides in the writing of this essay: Basil, Bokchoy, Crocus, Nasturtium, and Shiso.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the guidance and advice of my supervisor, Dr. Alison Beale, and teaching assistant, Byron Hauck.

I would also like to thank my mother, for her unending support throughout my university career.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my friend Erika De Torres, for agreeing to help me make last-minute edits to this work when I could no longer stand to look at this essay.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

This research project aimed to assess, by considering the way Vancouver community garden participants communicate, whether the gardens are sites of activism. My interest in this project comes from my reading on the food sovereignty movement and finding that I agree with its ideological claims. My experiences of citizenship and culture, post-colonial thought, and anti-capitalist thought have contributed to this. There are three aspects of food sovereignty that stand out for me: dedication to social justice, rejection of big monoculture agroindustry, and rejection of capitalism as a system of providing resources for everyone on the planet. First, food sovereignty sees the injustice of people living in countries with potential and existing rich agriculture who do not have the possibility of eating nutritious foods. Second, food sovereignty is a struggle against agroindustry and its imposition of monoculture, which seems to spring in economic models that promote agricultural development for export. It is said to be more economically efficient and there is the possibility of increasing yield with the help of 'green revolution' techniques, such as artificial fertilizer and chemical pesticides, as well as through the use of genetically modified organisms. However, monoculture can be dangerous, leading to ecological degradation and economic hardship. Third, the current food system is unjust and unsustainable, since it fails to feed the poorer people of even the wealthiest nations – we only need to look toward Nunavut to know that this is true. While the ultimate goals of food sovereignty are justice and equality for the peasants of the world, there are possibilities for others who make up the world's poor and especially those who live in countries with extraction-based economies. We, residents of the global North, have the responsibility of being aware of how the various systems that we benefit from affect others in this world. I believe that the way to justice and equality lies through not only judicial, military, and political change, but also through economic change. In terms of food, this change is in global agriculture systems, in which people must grow nutritious food but can not afford nutritious food. While I do not believe that community gardens in Vancouver can miraculously bring this change, the research presented in this essay suggests that they can be places where we may explore the possibility of change..

Chapter 2.

Background information

Food sovereignty

My research interest in community gardening has stemmed from an interest in food sovereignty. I define food sovereignty as a set of principles which were formulated in opposition to the way food is grown in the world currently, to promote localized food production that is ethically produced and culturally appropriate. It is important to state that food sovereignty is distinct from food security. Lucy Jarosz, in “Comparing food security and food sovereignty discourses” (2014), separates the assumptions and theoretical bases of the terms “food security” and “food sovereignty”. The 1986 World Bank report, *Poverty and Hunger*, described food insecurity as caused by “a lack of purchasing power on the part of nations and of households”, stating that this is the more important issue than the issue of “inadequate food supplies” in the world. This view is maintained in the current structure of food production as a discrete economic activity, separated from consumers, who simply choose what they want from the market (p. 171). All of the discourse on food security is about food production, supply, and demand in a global food chain, which supposedly can through free trade alleviate poverty in the global South. And yet, there is no discussion of hunger and poverty of the global North built into the food security theorization, which can be criticized as a lack of self-reflection and failure to clearly look at world hunger (p. 173).

The theorization of “food sovereignty” stems out of a Marxist analysis of global capitalism, as a direct critique of the way food security as a principle within global free trade governance had failed to alleviate global hunger or injustice. Thus, this term “food sovereignty” emphasizes the power of the peasants to be part of a movement for change in global agriculture and food policy. This term implies that the human right to food is a right to not only purchase, but also to produce food, and take part in decision-making about how food is produced (p. 173). Furthermore, the term has also come to include the consumption of “healthy and culturally appropriate food” (Declaration of Nyeleni, on p.

174), which has importance for both individuals' personal health¹ and individuals' connections to their community or cultural identities. There is an integration of these terms that, Jarosz suggests, creates an opportunity to connect “food access to autonomy”, and to imagine food systems that nourish people and are just, ethical, and environmentally responsible (p. 179). The integration has manifested itself in the struggle of North Americans of African descent, Indigenous people, and diasporic communities to create food production and supply systems that both ensure food security and allow food sovereignty (p. 177).

Philip McMichael, in “Historicizing food sovereignty” (2014), provides a thorough discussion of the implications “sovereignty” has, and what critiques this framework of thinking gives. “Sovereignty” is a term that suggests that citizens have a right to make decisions about their own food supply and ensure their own security. The food sovereignty movement critiques the “current, corporate food regime” (p. 937), and stands with the ethic that food is a human right, rather than a commodity (p. 938). McMichael shows that food sovereignty is tied with other radical and progressive movements by building the argument that the movement includes in its conception of “sovereignty” concerns from other movements. There are ecological concerns from green movements, which manifest themselves in the emphasis on farming practices that are sustainable in terms of fuels and inputs, diverse in species, and which can ‘nurture the land’ as opposed to robbing it of nutrients (p. 939). The movement is also inextricably interwoven with poverty and the fight against poverty, with McMichael providing data to support the claim that in protests worldwide, protesters were recognizing that their governments were supporting a global system of food production which had the effect of further impoverishing the already poor (p. 948).

I saw that food sovereignty is a movement which consisted of values that we can identify with many other movements, such as environmentalism, peasant rights, post-colonialism, and anti-capitalism. Based on my first-glance research on community

¹ Recent studies show that African-Americans who are put on a traditionally African diet have better digestive health markers than African Americans who do not. The health problems caused by untraditional eating for Inuit people has been widely noted. It has been argued that Native Children could be performing poorly in American schools because of lactose intolerance, unable to focus while having to suffer its unavoidable symptoms when low-income lunches only provide milk as a beverage and also contain milk products in other parts of the lunch. These three miniature examples illustrate how the idea that all humans have the same nutritional needs is proving to be incorrect.

gardens, I wondered if community gardening can be a means to achieve the goals of food sovereignty: to draw food production back to the local, to produce food that is 'culturally-appropriate', to nourish all strata of society, and to create a more just system of food production. The rest of this section explains the further research that I did before starting this research project of interviewing East Vancouver community gardeners, and the conclusions that I have drawn.

Gardening in history and today

Before starting on the interview-based research project about some of East Vancouver's community gardens, I read about Canadian community gardening, and community gardening as activism.

Rhetoric and Roses: A History of Canadian Gardening (1984) by Edwina von Baeyer covers a pivotal time for Canadian gardening. Historically, the Canadian government, various organizations, and notable individuals promoted all kinds of gardening; including what we would call community gardening today. The reasons for gardening were often oriented towards promoting a common good, aside from food-growing. Gardening was promoted as a way to produce model citizens who devoted their spare time beautifying their homes and neighbourhoods, rather than drinking, gambling, or participating in Bolshevism. It was thought that 'foreigners' could be more easily assimilated through gardening activity² (pp. 2-4, 10-11). School gardens, tended by schoolchildren together, were pushed into curricula first as a means of teaching children to love nature, as well as to grow their curiosity for sciences and other learning. This agenda morphed into one of using school gardens to teaching rural children the practical skills of agriculture and to instill in them a love for the countryside – thus stopping their migration en masse into the cities and giving them a way to survive while living in the rural parts of Canada (pp. 34-65).

Rhetoric and Roses does note a time when Canadian gardening focused specifically on producing enough food: World War One. Railway gardens on the CPR railways, maintained by railway workers and usually containing ornamental plants, were

² 'Foreigners' in quotes because those who demanded assimilation were White settlers, not Indigenous people.

converted to vegetable gardens (p. 27). Provincial governments urged for school gardens to be used as war gardens, using children's continued labour input to grow produce for consumption and for sale to profit patriotic funds (pp. 61-62). Vacant lot gardening, gardening on unused land by separating it into plots or by labouring the whole garden communally, was supported by the Canadian government and civic groups alike. "Federally, vacant lot cultivation became synonymous with the greater production campaigns strongly supported by the Department of Agriculture". This trend carried on after the war, with charity organizations promoting vacant lot gardening as a dignified way of helping the urban poor and creating employment. This was a popular activity which developed a certain urban gardening culture, with competitions among and within city districts, "amateur garden market shops", communal root houses, and memberships of 10,000 gardeners in some cities. However, this enthusiasm dropped off in the 1920s (pp. 91-97). This historical background explains to some extent why community gardening is thriving in Vancouver. This history explains why much research on community gardening focuses on its benefits outside of food security and nutrition, instead investigating the benefits of community gardening as a means for neighbourhood improvement, education, mental health, community-building, fighting senior loneliness, or other benefits.

Hence it is not correct or necessary, just because community gardens often produce food, to assume that they are chiefly efficient means of providing food and nutrition to food-insecure people. A study by Rachel Loopstra and Valerie Tarasuk (2013) has shown that food-insecure households do not always access community gardening as a food insecurity support service. Less than 5% of 485 low-income, tenant Toronto families that participated in the study were accessing community gardens and community kitchens to deal with their food needs. The lack of information about these programs, as well as lack of time and lack of interest in the activities of community gardening and community kitchens were barriers for people accessing these services. This study is very relevant when the question of community gardening is framed as a food security solution, when statistics from another large Canadian city suggest that not enough is done to ensure that everyone who wants to access this activity may do so. Furthermore, the authors question the idea that people who experience food insecurity want to participate in community gardening (pp. 56-58).

In "Food Fixations: Reconfiguring class in contemporary US food discourse" (2015) Helene Shugart discusses how the discourse of 'whole' or 'healthful' eating in the US, and

the West generally, I would say, has enabled class and capitalism to excuse themselves from the questions of nutrition, food security, and food sovereignty. The middle class is positioned as concerned, passionate savior of farmers dedicated to natural foods, of public health, of communities with no food culture, and of uneducated dupes (pp. 241-76). They are knowing, engaged, politically critical and active citizen-consumers, as opposed to the self-serving food-producing 'elites' that are searching to exploit any opportunity to increase profits. The elites are seen as divorced from nature with their year-round agricultural production, unethical with their inhumane treatment of animals and humans alike, and power-abusing with their government lobbying and armies or lawyers (pp. 268-70). Finally, lower class – obese, uneducated, influenced and lied to by the elites, and thus in need of direction (pp. 271-74). Shugart notes that in this discourse “individual wealth is not morally suspect” (p. 271). In other words, capitalism is not found to be the at fault, and the elite class is not at fault because it benefits from exploitative agricultural capitalism. The elite class is at fault because it is corrupt, unethical, and divorced from nature. The discourse holds the view that the purchase of whole foods is a political choice, whereby “you are voting with your fork for a planet with fewer pesticides, richer soil, and cleaner water supplies” (quoted from Nestle, 2006, on p. 275). Thus citizens become consumers, who act upon their concerns by making lifestyle choices. This article provides a useful critique of a currently pervasive view of the politics of food production, and gives the insight that even some ‘enlightened’ individuals blame the poor for their struggles with food security. Yet numerous works by people, describing their experiences with poverty, fight against the notion that people who face food insecurity are simply uninformed. There is more to food insecurity than knowing that leafy greens are good for you.

I would now say, based on Loopstra and Tarasuk’s (2013) study, that we must not think of community gardens as an individual-produced replacement for social security and governmental policy aimed at reducing poverty and injustice. This assessment is supported by Karen Bridget Murray’s essay “Making Space in Vancouver’s East End: From Leonard Marsh to the Vancouver agreement” (Murray, 2011). It provides a history of the growth and decline of social policies that were set in place in the Grandview-Woodland area of Vancouver by municipal government from the forties to the present day. Murray’s analysis of the way policies affecting the area changed from Keynesian principles of socially-supported welfare to the more current practices of placing most of the responsibility and burden of one’s and one’s family’s welfare on the individual. In

Grandview-Woodland and in the Britannia Community Services Centre, this meant that support for families with children fell, creating increased family poverty as well as exacerbating the conditions of single mothers (pp. 25-28). We as a society can not ask people who are food-insecure to solve all of their own problems, when poverty is caused by the characteristics of the system we live in. Murray put in much work to point out that in Grandview-Woodland, some of the most vulnerable people were failed by policy. As a researcher, I feel I have responsibility not to perpetuate the idea that food-insecure people should just grow their own food.

How can gardening be activism?

Community Gardening as Social Action (2014) by Claire Nettle is a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the case of Australian community gardening and whether community gardening, and the activities surrounding gardening can be considered to be social activism. Nettle systematically dissects and analyses this question. Nettle conducted interviews with Australian community gardeners, using the interview data to draw out themes, and produced analysis using social movement theory. The book contains an overview of Australian community gardening, a review of how community is defined, a brief review of social movement theory, and a discussion of how social movement theory can be applied to community gardens. A particularly pertinent part of Nettle's last section is the one where the author makes the connection between prefigurative direct action and community gardening. Nettle defines prefigurative direct action as focusing "on 'creating an alternative social world' through actions that have immediate and intrinsic value and also lay foundations for ongoing change" (p. 178). Prefigurative action rejects the notion that political change – namely, political revolution – can come before social and cultural change. Change is hence built through many micro-resistances, an "accumulation of small changes". Nettle pulls out the idea of counter institutions which can both model a "desired social order" and "address needs that are unmet by the current system". Nettle describes "community gardens or squats or women's health centres" all as examples of counter institutions, arguing that they can serve as providers of services that are missing in the current dominant order, and as examples of better alternatives. In this way, Nettle writes, counter institutions "dramatise ... the failures of the system" and "[protest] against things they oppose" (pp. 178-79). Counter institutions

are consciousness-raising and they change their actual environments with their presence and action.

Nettle concludes their³ book with the discussion of prefigurative action as a social movement repertoire which has been mostly ignored in favour of “accounts premised on an understanding of social movement action as involving only highly confrontational, public and dramatic forms of contention” (p. 203). The reason this is problematic is that social movements, by seeing only such actions as legitimate forms of resistance, lose an entire category of action that they can pursue in order to suggest a better alternative for our human existence. Nettle sets up the argument for prefigurative action in their discussion of how community is understood. Comparing community gardens with women’s health centres that arose out of the feminist movement, Nettle (2014) points out that these are:

institutions that address the needs of broad local communities, rather than seeking only to meet the needs of those who are members of the movement. As ‘sustenance institutions’, community gardens can be seen as an externally-focused political strategy – to demonstrate communities working together to effectively meet their own collective needs – rather than as merely part of a movement-building strategy. Community in this sense suggests people who work together to address mutual needs and vision without the intervention or sponsorship of the state or the market. (p. 125)

In other words, community gardens are not the means to achieving a goal that is set by a ‘larger’ movement, rather, the collective act of creating and maintaining a community garden is a whole and valuable action in itself. Furthermore, the community is created through this action and it is created organically, without the involvement of government or business. Nettle also discusses community as suggesting the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. To solidify the point, the example of “rough sleepers” is brought up, noting how different gardens approach the question differently, with some trying to find ways to discourage homeless people from staying at the garden and others allowing them to stay overnight, share in the produce, and even setting up a ‘guardian’ position for a more permanent arrangement for one homeless person (pp. 125-31). I will be using Claire Nettle’s work to draw parallels or contradictions between their analysis and my findings.

³ I use “they” and “their” as a gender-neutral pronoun for all of the people in this essay.

Chapter 3.

The research

Research topic

The research was centred on community gardens' communication methods within their individual structures and with the non-gardening community. By investigating communication methods and using the criteria discussed by Nettle (2014), is it possible to assess whether these actions on the part of community gardens suggest that community gardening is activism?

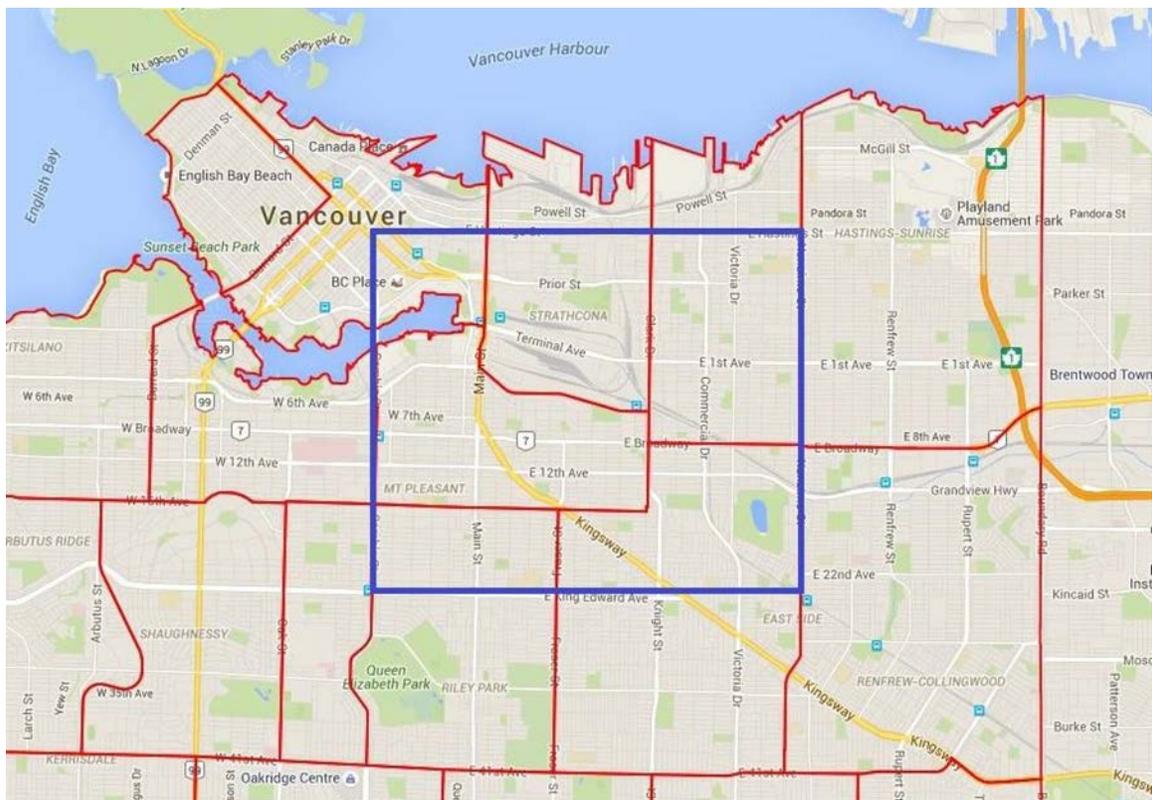


Figure 1 The boundaries used to designate the gardens that were included in research.

Map image source: City of Vancouver website (www.vancouver.ca)

The community gardens that were studied all came from a specific area which is bounded by the following streets: Hastings Street in the north, Nanaimo Street in the east, King Edward Avenue in the south, and Cambie Street in the west. This boundary includes

parts of the neighbourhoods of Grandview-Woodland, Mount Pleasant, Strathcona, and Kensington-Cedar Cottage. The number of community gardens in this area that are on the City of Vancouver website is approximately 50.

These areas were chosen because of their location in the heart of Vancouver, high population density, high density of community gardens and other food assets, and, significantly, because they have certain histories of both citizen activism and municipal social policy aimed at these specific locales. It was thought that the proximity to the Downtown East Side, which is historically a very low-income area with a high need for social support and services, would have resulted in higher citizen activism around food security and greater involvement of residents with activities such as community gardening. This last theory was not particularly corroborated during the interviews – the discussion of what was found will follow further on.

Research method

The research that I sought to do was primary research which included the expertise of people who are active in Vancouver's community gardening. The people that I eventually decided to interview are in managing position in gardens located within the selected boundary (Hastings, Nanaimo, King Edward, and Cambie). Each community garden is required by the City of Vancouver to have designated people who deal with the garden's organizational and legal questions. Hence, these designated individuals were chosen as the participants because they are bound to be active in the community gardens of Vancouver, and are likely to be extremely knowledgeable about most qualities and aspects of the community gardening communities of Vancouver. It was thought that coordinators are also more likely to be willing to share their knowledge and opinions, given that they are in voluntary responsible administrator positions.

To recruit community garden coordinators, a document published by the City of Vancouver website was accessed⁴. Each community garden address was checked for its location and each community garden within the selected boundary was highlighted. If the highlighted garden had an email address listed, that address was sent a standardized

⁴ vancouver.ca/people-programs/community-gardens.aspx The document is a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet which contains information about each registered community garden, including year of foundation, address, website, and contact email

recruitment email. A total of approximately 30 gardens were emailed. A number of people responded within the first few days, most agreeing to be interviewed. When the final details were set, the total number of people who were interviewed was five⁵.

Nearly all of the interviews were conducted at the gardens that are managed by the participants. Some questions were about the garden's history and its current state: "Tell me the story of how the garden began", "Do you see a lot of demand for the plots in your garden?". Most of the interview questions were about how community gardening is promoted in the city: "How did most of the people in your garden get involved in the garden?", "Do you see there being a major promoter of community gardening in the city?". To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned a code name distinct from their own name. In fact, the code names are names of plants.

⁵ Four of five interviewees were White, and three of five were men. This could suggest something about the community gardening community in East Vancouver, or something about East Vancouver itself – but it is outside of the scope of this discussion.

Chapter 4.

Research findings

Introducing the participants

To help the readers understand the context the participants are coming from, participants and their gardens will be introduced in order of interview.

Basil: 25 or 26 years ago, a community garden was "started out of militancy" (Basil, 2016) to reclaim public space during the activism and protests in 1970s Vancouver. Basil, the interviewee, says that the purpose was probably to "clean up a dump", and beautify the land, as well as to take ownership of the land (Basil, 2016).

Crocus: In 1988, Crocus and a few like-minded people went to the Parks Board with a project. They wanted to create a community garden in a then-empty lot. The Parks Board approved their project, with the unwritten understanding that "if we fell on our face or if it was a flop, it would be over in a year". The group had to build from scratch – clearing rubble, bringing in manure. The garden plots were all fully subscribed in the first year and they started a waitlist (Crocus, 2016).

Shiso: The garden was built in 2008. Shiso, the current garden coordinator, attended a workshop where some of the planning occurred, but much of the preliminary work was already done. The garden was put on city land. Unlike the rest of the gardens, this garden is communal. Nobody has an individual plot, but all of the gardeners work all of the plots together and share in the harvest (Shiso, 2016).

Nasturtium: This garden was set up by volunteers in 2013. Nasturtium is paid to manage a number of gardens, and the particular garden we were in during the interview was previously a lot where chemicals were sold. This garden, unlike the other four, is a temporary garden, and can be evicted anytime with a month's notice. The purpose of the garden is "creating temporary space out of totally unused land" (Nasturtium, 2016).

Bok Choy: About three years ago, a group of neighbours from an area of East Van approached the City to create a community garden. The designing and siting, assisted by the City of Vancouver, "was apparently a very easy process". The garden was built and

opened in partnership with a non-profit. Bok Choy moved into the neighbourhood and joined the garden two and a half years ago, and has been on the organizing committee ever since (Bok Choy, 2016).

Gardens emphasize face-to-face contact

The participants reported a wide range of media that were used for internal and external communications. Internal communications media, used for sending messages among gardeners, include telephone, email, Facebook groups, and Google groups. There are engagement issues for many of the gardens. Most of the participants reported that they have gardeners who do not have an email address, and many gardeners not having a phone contact. Basil commented that in their garden, "Everyone's very private" (Basil, 2016). Nasturtium reports that the emails they send "tend to get fifty to seventy percent opening rate, like clicks, through MailChimp ... which is pretty good" (Nasturtium, 2016). The garden coordinators do sometimes have timely messages that need to be communicated to gardeners, and that is when they resort to contacting through more than one medium. Bok Choy reports posting in the Google group as well as sending an email to all of the gardeners when there is a message that "needs to go out", "because not everyone is on Google groups". They also "post things on the shed, for people that don't have any email" (Bok Choy, 2016). This is not a method that has particularly worked for Nasturtium's garden, where "Facebook has been a way better thing" (Nasturtium, 2016). The messages that are communicated internally are practical matters. These can be messages asking for help with watering while a gardener is away, or posting about lost-and-found items: "I found a pair of sunglasses in the garden, are these yours" (Nasturtium, 2016). They also communicate reminders about upcoming work parties, occasions of theft, or dangers in the garden.

External communications media, used for getting messages to people who are not directly involved in the garden, include the Parks Board and City of Vancouver websites, posting a classified ad online through Craigslist, and posters. In this situation, people are already thinking of joining a community garden and are actively searching. Conversely, a few of the interviewees suggest that they have gardeners who joined after seeing the garden itself, when walking by or wandering in. Crocus, Shiso, Nasturtium, and Bok Choy all report having a poster or placard with contact details placed in their gardens. However, Shiso said that they don't think that anyone has ever walked by the garden and decided

to get involved, even though "There is a bit of word of mouth ... We do have a sign that says if you want to volunteer, you can email." (Shiso, 2016). In this situation, the medium is the garden itself. Nasturtium says that "our website, and the physical walk-bys are the two biggest" ways their garden recruits new gardeners (Nasturtium, 2016). Nasturtium's garden does not have a long waitlist, and so they sometimes face issues with ensuring that all of the plots are being used. They say that "developing a sign-up, registration, and payment app that has really helped us to funnel people in. ... I think a big challenge is to, at the beginning of the season, is to get everyone to view the rules and agreements." Since their garden doesn't communicate much about the rules of the garden, the app is seen as an easier way to get all of the gardener's to review the rules (Nasturtium, 2016). A few of the gardens do have long waitlists, so coordinators do not try to overly advertise their gardens – it is unnecessary and can disappoint people who will get put a waitlist for year or two. Crocus suggested that not advertising is a choice for other reasons as well: "that way you're getting people who want to be part of this. We're not twisting any arms." (Crocus, 2016)

Aside from communication through media, there is a strong emphasis on face-to-face contact among the gardeners. In terms of recruiting new gardeners, Crocus says that those who wish to join "can ask any of the gardeners who happen to be here [at the garden] how to get in touch with us, with me. People do find out that way." (Crocus, 2016). When Nasturtium needs to fill vacancies at the garden, they ask gardeners to "Tell people who you know are interested to get in touch and that we have space, that's a good way [to recruit new gardeners." (Nasturtium, 2016). Basil reports that it is their garden's policy that people must come to work parties to join the garden. "If you want to get into the garden, you have to come to a work party. So we do things face-to-face, and many people can't deal with that, like, why can't I do this over email?" (Basil, 2016). Gardeners also, as it is to be expected, share many messages through their personal interactions with each other at the garden. Basil spoke of how "news just kind of spreads, like a gossip tree". A dimension of the face-to-face communication at the garden is posting news on the shed: "we hang posters in the shed, that's a great way to communicate. So if someone's been stealing, they'll hang their picture up, and say, this person's a problem." (Basil, 2016). Basil also says that their garden's organizing committee's way of getting messages to gardeners is "a hodgepodge. And stuff gets communicated at work parties and the general

meetings. But after the work party, a lot of people take off. They don't sit [waiting] for the meeting." (Basil, 2016).

A few of the garden coordinators seem to believe that community gardens are at their best when there is more physical communication than mediated communication. Crocus spoke of it thus:

"when you think about it, you know like, the nuts and bolts, gardening is involved here, right, or the conversations that take place. You can do all that without social media. You don't have to have that. It's an add-on, it's a nice thing to have, as far as, I guess, sharing what you're doing with the wider audience, or something. But it's not essential. I don't know if it makes the place any better, better-run, or if it makes any of the friendships any better, or any of the relationships any better." (Crocus, 2016)

Basil voiced a similar opinion:

"We're too diverse a community and it's about the gardens, about working in the plots, it's not about creating community online, or over the telephone.... for me the community happens on the ground. So I think it's the face-to-face. People need to come to the work parties, people need to be present, people need to talk to each other, and we need to share information face-to-face. And I think that's what works best. It's very old-fashioned. ... It really is grounded in face-to-face communication." (Basil, 2016)

Friendliness is appreciated, not required

While there is a noticeable emphasis on gardeners communicating with each other, and especially face-to-face, there is also an important agreement – if someone does not want social interaction, they are allowed to have their space. A few of the garden coordinators brought up not making people attend garden events, or other activities that they might be uninterested in, aside from the actual gardening. Crocus reports having a gardeners' potluck every summer "as kind of a team-building exercise." (Crocus, 2016). Nasturtium reports having tried running monthly events, but admitted that attendance is low. "Because people are busy, and ... there's no volunteer obligations here. ... basically pay your very small annual fee ... And you get soil, and you go at it on your own." This suggests being social is not imposed on gardeners if they do not wish to be social. The garden is "a neutral space and ... the social element of the garden is a little bit more free-flowing now. ... And it's been really good, actually, I would say. Because we don't pester

people a lot ...” (Nasturtium, 2016). Crocus discussed how visitors may be greeted by gardeners, or may be not: "when someone comes to visit... It depends on them, and it depends on you, how friendly you and the gardener want to be. We're not forced to be friendly to each other." Non-gardeners are free to visit, stay, "have a picnic, wander around" (Crocus, 2016) without having to interact with anybody.

Organization of community gardens is non-hierarchical

Much like in the case of social interactions at the garden, community garden coordinators do not force people to be part of governance activities. The organization of the community gardens that were considered in this research seems to be generally ad-hoc.

Crocus’s garden is generally run by Crocus, with “small decisions, like do we need to get a new shovel” usually made by Crocus alone. When there are “bigger decisions, say if we were to reconfigure or change the pathway system”, Crocus will “try consult and talk with people, especially the key people who are involved in this place”. Crocus explains that the garden doesn’t “have a whole bunch of committees”, with “ad-hoc working groups from time to time when” necessary. Crocus says about this arrangement:

“I guess I was willing to do it, I was committed to do it, and I was happy to do it. And the feedback I got over the years is that people are happy enough that I am willing to do that.” (Crocus, 2016)

Crocus doesn’t recall very many times when a gardener strongly disagreed with a decision Crocus made. There was an instance when a gardener wanted to make a big change at the garden, which resulted in a collective meeting and decision:

"The person wanted due process, wanted to be heard, and when we couldn't come to an agreement, the two of us, we threw it open to a meeting in the garden. We met right here, anybody who wanted to come could come, and we laid out the issue, and came to a decision pretty quickly." (Crocus, 2016)

The other garden coordinators report having similar processes for how decisions are made in their gardens. Basil’s garden has well-established policies which have not changed much in the lifetime of the garden. Basil says that "The only thing that changes is whether or not we implement the policy. ... It changes from year to year, and when

things become a problem, we have to deal with it." Similar to Crocus's description of their garden's way of solving issues, Basil's gardeners solve outstanding problems "on an ad-hoc basis, ... When problems arise, we deal with it in pretty civil ways. There's debates, fights, maybe. ... Disagreements. We work them out." (Basil, 2016). Having described the process at their garden, Basil commented: "It's a messy place. It's not well-regulated, it's run on anarchist principles, it's done by volunteers. There really is no rigid hierarchy." (Basil, 2016)

At Shiso's garden, because the number of gardeners is much fewer than with the other gardens and because the garden is communal, the gardeners decide together how the garden will be planted. The decision is based on desire and resource availability: "what do we want to plant, what seeds do we have". Like Crocus, Shiso consults with some members when making other decisions: "I try, if we're buying things, get the opinion of the people who are actually doing the [gardening], if that's good or not. If it works for them." (Shiso, 2016)

Shiso reports that not all the gardeners want to be part of decision-making all of the time.

"Sometimes I think that people who volunteer just want to come and volunteer their two hours and not have to deal with making decisions... Some people want to be involved, and you can involve those people that want to, and the other people who are just like, ... you can do whatever, I'll just do what you want to do. It's a balance, I guess." (Shiso, 2016)

Bok Choy reports a similar structure at their garden, which has an organizing committee in which gardeners may volunteer. The garden is associated with a non-profit which "sort of helps manage it [the garden] but other than that, it's all pretty much just member organized and decision-making is all sort of by consensus." The garden also has an annual general meeting (AGM), where changes to policies are made by consensus (Bok Choy, 2016).

Gardeners and volunteers experience burnout

The garden coordinators all noted, at one point or another during the interviews, that volunteers and gardeners tire out and that there is not enough funding or time for some activities.

At Basil's garden, the gardeners used to organize an "elaborate plant sale", and organize a harvest festival, but "it was burning people up. People would be spending all their time doing that, their plots are neglected because they have to take care of the plant sale plants." The volunteers would expend most of their 'garden energy' on getting the events going, and would experience 'burnout', which is the loss of interest, energy, and motivation to do professional or volunteer work. Hence, Basil's garden didn't have a Harvest Festival for a while, and now they are organizing one again because there are volunteers to organize it (Basil, 2016).

Bok Choy states that the continued organizing of the garden takes a lot of energy. "We [the organizing committee] have a lot of turnover there as well, people that were involved in organizing the garden early on... I think were burned out, because they felt a lot was put on them." The earlier process in particular was difficult, because much enthusiasm and energy were put into building and setting up the garden, but when it came to managing the garden, people could not carry on:

"And that's a really hard thing, again because it's all volunteer-based. You have turnover, ... there were people who were very involved in the garden and left, and who is going to take over for them? So that's been very challenging. ... I think there's been some burnout, in that respect, especially from the organizers." (Bok Choy, 2016)

Bok Choy talks about an instance where the current organizing committee came up with a solution to a perpetual issue, and another gardener was suggesting that they do it a different way that would make more work for the committee:

"We're just trying to reduce the workload, because it's all volunteer [run], we don't have a manager, or somebody to really organize the garden. So it's kind of up to us to come here, sign people up, do all that kind of work. And that was a very long process. Just trying to reduce that workload. Of course, not everyone sees that." (Bok Choy, 2016)

Shiso, like Basil and Bok Choy, is concerned with the issue of burnout for gardeners and volunteers. The garden faces difficulties with water access, there are few funds for new equipment, which Shiso sees as affecting the enthusiasm of the gardeners: "I try to ensure that we make it easy and accessible for the gardeners to garden. ... you want to make sure that you have things provided ... if it's going to be so inconvenient, nobody is going to do it." (Shiso, 2016). Nasturtium says that while they would have liked to make the garden more of a site of "community engagement", it would be very time, and

energy, consuming – and there is no time, energy, or funding to make “great” events. Nasturtium is paid by their non-profit to oversee gardens “12 to 20 hours a week, and we [the non-profit] have six gardens, so we spread ourselves out.” (Nasturtium, 2016). Shiso reports that their garden has been “surviving through money from the Small Neighbourhood grants, and stuff like that, for the last couple of years.” (Shiso, 2016)

Basil says that “frustration, burnout. That's our biggest enemy. But show me a volunteer-run organization that's not [facing the same problem].” Basil believes that their garden, despite any issues, will last another 25 years. “I think we cope quite well... There's conflicts. There's politics. But overall, I think we run quite smoothly, along anarchist principles. It's a loosely-organized organization. We're all there with the same common purpose, which is to hold us together.” (Basil, 2016)

What is the community?

Most of the interviewees said that their gardeners were generally from the neighbourhood, and some defined their community as a geographic community of neighbourhood or area. One of the reasons gardeners generally live near the garden's location is practical: “it doesn't really make sense” to live further than “within a walking or biking distance of the garden”, since gardeners need to water their plot and tend to it (Nasturtium, 2016). Gardeners also have to frequently attend to common area maintenance needs (Bok Choy, 2016) (Shiso, 2016). Crocus says that in their garden,

“We deliberately restricted it geographically just to the [neighbourhood] area because we didn't want to take on the whole city. We didn't want to become that big and also it becomes a lot more bureaucratic ...” (Crocus, 2016).

Neighbourhood or area were not the only way the interviewees defining community. Basil describes their garden as

“the community of like-minded people who come and work on that space. ... it's a social practice as much as it is gardening. ... Have fun with the kids, wheelbarrow rides, you know, all that kind of thing. ... That's the community. The community is really built around gardening and really enjoying the space, and working on the space, and the community really comes together on the monthly work parties. That's when people get together, and we all pitch in to maintain the public areas.” (Basil, 2016)

We return again to Nettle's (2014) "Community in this sense suggests people who work together to address mutual needs and visions without the intervention or sponsorship of the state or the market" (p. 125). Basil's discussion of the community is centred on gardening, rather than on the neighbourhood or area itself. In Bok Choy's garden, there are common plots and a team designated to working the common plots, and the whole garden has work parties as well (Bok Choy, 2016). The gardeners bring people with them to the garden. Some families own and work plots together. Nasturtium estimates that with fifty plots paid and registered, there are probably 100 or 120 people eating from those plots. All of these gardeners can be said to be part of a group in which they work with others to create a common vision.

This is not the only way that the interviewees talked about community. Bok Choy says that joining the community garden after moving to the neighbourhood two and a half years ago has helped them feel more connected to their new community. Bok Choy made the specific decision of "jumping in and trying to get involved in the organizing committee as a way of building those connections. Now I know a bunch more people in the community than I would have otherwise." (Bok Choy, 2016)

At the same time, while there are examples of gardens that seem to be running well as a group, they are not all that way. Nasturtium's garden does not seem to be a very tight-knit group: "Do we have a community here? It's conversational, I don't think everyone is on a first-name basis though." (Nasturtium, 2016). It is possible that this may be an outcome of the temporariness of the garden. Nasturtium describes the garden's community as a "school group, it changes every year, but it forms a bond for the year." Similarly, Shiso reports that when people inquire to join their garden, they often change their mind because they do not get an individual plot: "I think the communal garden might not be for everyone." (Shiso, 2016). This suggests that many gardeners are not interested in taking part in a lot of communal decisions about planting and are not interested in a shared harvest. This seems like community gardening not as action for a shared goal, but purely individualized activity to fulfil one's own needs or desires.

Inclusivity and diversity as valued qualities

A few of the garden coordinators that were interviewed described the diversity of their gardeners by noting language, ethnicity, and citizenship status. Basil states that "a

quarter of our gardeners ... my guess, don't speak English, or barely speak English.” In Basil’s view, the garden demographic “Really reflects the demographic of the neighbourhood, which is like older Chinese, older immigrants, younger couples, kids, families have babies and they bring them to the garden.” (Basil, 2016). Crocus also said that the area where their garden is situated is “really diverse, really multicultural, and that’s reflected in who participates here. ... We’ve got at least a dozen different nationalities. Some people that speak very little English, especially if they happen to be older people.” Nasturtium reports having new immigrant gardeners (Nasturtium, 2016). Bok Choy notes a somewhat different demographic in their garden: “I would say that it’s predominantly White.” (Bok Choy, 2016). Crocus also suggested that the income level or affluence of their gardeners was lower than in the surrounding areas: “[The housing in the area is] 85 percent or so three-story buildings, and there’s a mix of condos and rental buildings, about 50-50 I’d say. And the rentals tend to be on the lower end for Vancouver, lower cost.” (Crocus, 2016). Interestingly, affluence was not mentioned by the other interviewees. Age was reported as having variant diversity by the different gardeners. In Nasturtium’s garden, “We had originally seen a bit of an older population, and now it’s starting to swing where I’d say we’ve got for the first time maybe a fifty-fifty split, people above forty and people under forty” (Nasturtium, 2016). Crocus reports of their gardeners’ ages as: “all ages, youngsters to seniors. Might skew slightly older because there are certain ages we don’t get a lot of, like teenagers. ... We got some families with smaller kids who are really keen to get them [kids] involved.” (Crocus, 2016). Bok Choy’s gardeners are typically “middle age families” with kids (Bok Choy, 2016).

Nettle (2014) described how community was spoken of as the opposite of a group of “like-minded people”. Instead, the community gardeners interviewed by Nettle would describe community as a group of people who have conflicts, disagreements, whose beliefs and values are different (pp. 128-29). The community for them is an actively transforming entity, in which no beliefs or values prevail, but rather they negotiate and coexist. Hence the reason for emphasizing diversity and inclusion, for the interviewees in this research, may be two fold: one, they are appealing to these as accepted Canadian liberal values, and two, they are emphasizing that there are different people in their community, but they proceed as a group despite their differences. The second reason should not be dismissed, particularly when considering that the self-governance structures of these gardens is generally based on discussion, debate, and consensus. Nettle’s

discussion of consensus does include its critiques, which argue that the search for consensus smothers dissent, or creates individuals who are unwilling to pursue real debate. Nettle compounds this criticism with the commentary and analysis that community is not always seen as occurring easily when there were opportunities to have “unmediated social interactions”, or “from the creation of spaces and forms of organization that aim to be inclusive”. Community, in Nettle’s interviews, was often seen as “conscious, - and difficult – work of facilitating, nurturing and encouraging relationships of friendship and care (pp. 130-131). One of Basil’s comments seems to support this view of community:

“When I go to work on my plot, I have to spend half my time chatting with the gardeners. I mean, it’s a social practice as much as it is gardening. Gardening is like, oh I gotta talk to Jenny next door, and Ms. Li⁶, the old Chinese lady ... has her plot next to mine. And it’s like, Hi Ms. Li, and she doesn’t speak English, but you know. This is good, look at my beans, she tries to give me produce.” (Basil, 2016)

Framing the socializing as a necessary element of gardening is an indicator of the work that goes into community gardening. Community does not simply arise. It must be worked for. Such work can include organizing work parties, communal events, meetings, or celebrations (Nettle, 2014, pp. 130-133). All of the participants reported having communal events for their gardeners, be it a picnic, a Springtime ‘get your plots ready’ party, a festival celebrating the harvest, a meeting to make decisions, or another kind of collective gathering. Such work can also mean working towards creating a space that is welcoming to people. Rather than “merely avoiding active exclusion” such as discouraging certain people from joining, community gardeners should actively include, such as by creating signs and other written materials in ‘minority’ languages. (Nettle, 2014, p. 164).

Inclusivity and diversity are thus also measured by who enters and uses the garden. The participants spoke of how non-gardeners in the surrounding area would interact with the garden. Inclusivity and diversity are not seen by the interviewees as just age, ethnicity, immigration, and language markers. As a way to illustrate the inclusivity of their garden, Bok Choy brought up the garden’s fence. The fence around Bok Choy’s garden can be described as an arrangement of wooden posts around the perimeter of the

⁶ Names were changed.

garden, all connected together with three horizontal wires on which vines and other plants creep.

"I think in terms of the design there was thought to making sure it was acceptable for people. Having inclusion and community groups, like I was mentioning with the fencing, there was a lot of sensitivities around the fact that this is kind of a mixed neighbourhood and, that you didn't want to make this garden seem like it was, you know, excluding people. So that was part of the intention with the design of the fencing." (Bok Choy, 2016)

Bok Choy doesn't employ romantic imagery to describe their garden. Similar to Basil, they say that the garden does create "a sense of community", but it doesn't mean that the community is perfect: "it's not like, oh we built a community garden here and now everyone is holding hands and singing songs. There is always tension, cause that's just the way people are." However, all of the participants said that they believe, or at least hope, that the non-gardening people in the surrounding area like to have the garden there. Crocus spoke of people in the neighbourhood seeing the garden as a given, as one of their public spaces. "I think that's a big difference, that people see this as theirs now. You don't have to have a plot here, you come to visit. And people certainly do. They're happy to have it." (Crocus, 2016). Bok Choy's hope is that the garden enhances the park and area that the garden is situated in:

"It draws people here. If this was just whatever this used to be ... It definitely has changed the space, it's changed the park, it's given it something else, other than just grass. ... They're not here because of the garden but it's still around them and they can see stuff growing and see food growing and I think that's neat. And it may or may not affect them. I remember some little kids coming through for some class ... and they were like four, five, and they were fascinated with the apples ... It was so cool! Yeah, you can eat those apples! And that was like yeah, that's why we have the garden. That is a good thing." (Bok Choy, 2016)

Bok Choy reports that their garden is used by many people aside from the gardeners, noting that the "space that gets used ... a variety of different ways. Not just for growing food." (Bok Choy, 2016).

Nettle (2014) writes that community events such as fairs, festivals, exhibitions, and performances are a valuable aspect of practicing community gardening. These events show the gardens' success, engage the wider public with the gardens' visions, and create ritual, especially "relating to season and place" (p. 149).

At Basil's garden, the harvest festival is when they will be giving tours of the different parts of the garden and explaining how things grow. Shiso has put effort to "have events at the garden ... every year, and do a bit of promotion." The last event Shiso organized was a bird house and bee condo workshop at their garden, but it didn't bring in new gardeners (Shiso, 2016). Nasturtium describes their garden's annual garden opening, during which the gardeners start their plots for the season.

"We'll invite a local garden store ... And they'll bring their truck and sell starts ... it's the all-in-one experience. Clean up your bed, compost it, get your seeds in the ground, and then ... you're off to the races. ... All the placards get painted. And we have a photographer and it's a bit of an event. And that tends to draw in mostly gardeners who have already signed up, but because it's a bit of a spectacle other people might wander in and think, that looks fun, and sign up for the waitlist or I could even assign them an empty plot if there was one." (Nasturtium, 2016)

Bok Choy's garden does not organize any celebrations or events, due to the organizers already having too much responsibility and work. Bok Choy explains that "when everything was getting started and everyone was super excited about the garden... again people get burned out with organizing events and things like that." (Bok Choy, 2016). This is similar to Basil's account of how the harvest festival was not organized for a few years because the organizers would burn out from the work and there were no volunteers to replace them.

Nettle (2014) writes of community events as movement building, in the sense that these events can attract new people to consider the issues presented at such events. However, Nettle also considers the act of community gardens organizing such events as a collective to be movement-building – it shows the commitment people have for the movement in a different way (pp. 156-59). The only garden in this research that 'fits the bill' for this analysis is the harvest festival organized at Basil's garden. The other participants suggested that their volunteers and gardeners are already too overworked to get any kind of big events organized. Nevertheless, the small events they organize, or even the garden's existence in itself, can serve the purposes outlined by Nettle – displaying the bountiful produce and beautiful flowers, suggesting that it is more possible than the visitor has imagined to successfully grow food in an urban setting.

Less pleasant interactions with visitors

All of the participants reported dealing with issues of theft in their gardens. Typically, they suggested that it was people from outside of the garden taking the produce or flowers. “People will come in and they will take every flower in the entire garden. Fill a shopping cart and go and sell them on Hastings Street.” (Basil, 2016). The interviewees all mentioned that a little bit of picking ‘here and there’ was not an issue for most of the gardeners, but it was a more of a problem when produce was removed “systematically” in large amounts. While Crocus reports that theft is “common” at their garden, Crocus estimates “that it's less than five percent of what gets grown here. And probably closer to one percent, that gets taken. When you look at it that way, it doesn't amount to much. [It would] Be nice if it was zero, but that's not the world we live in.” Crocus said that they notice it is more common that produce “rots or doesn't get picked by the gardener” than it is for produce to get stolen.

The participants also reported issues aside from theft, such as private areas being used by people to use drugs or to camp. There are also issues of vandalism, and of people visiting and leaving trash such as alcohol bottles or cans, cigarette butts, plastic bags, and others. In Basil's garden, the impetus to remove wild-growing shrubs and underbrush, and to replace them with various plots and facilities, has been in reaction to people using the overgrown areas to set up tents, to break up stolen bicycles and old televisions and such, to use drugs and leave needles, for prostitution, and to generally camp for extended periods of time. The gardeners are afraid to confront the people doing these things, so they remove the spaces where such activities can take place surreptitiously. In terms of the drug use, for Basil, the issue is with leaving needles in the garden, because they present a danger to the adult and child gardeners and visitors. Basil reports that the needle problem is so large that they have designated people whose single task is to pick up and dispose of needles.

At Bok Choy's garden, there was some disagreement about having a picnic table at the garden. Bok Choy explains that “it was just sort of seen as a, maybe, attracting people that shouldn't be in the garden? ... the perspective ... was expressed.” Bok Choy expressed to me that this is not their perspective, but this was certainly a strong disagreement at their garden.

The different gardens navigate these difficult issues in different ways. Generally, it can be said that the gardeners deal with these issues in a tolerating manner. The participants did not exhibit any particular pride about the way these issues were dealt with, but did suggest that there is little they can do themselves to change the fact that these situations occur.

On the issue of people camping at Basil's garden, Basil explains:

"It's a great place to camp. You can go off in a corner somewhere, in the bushes, and set up a nice little campsite, and live there for weeks. We kind of tolerate it. We don't kick people out. We don't steal their stuff. ... We don't give them a hard time. ... But at some point we gotta go in and say, this isn't a campsite. And we don't have insurance. If someone dies ... What are we gonna do? We could get sued." (Basil, 2016)

Due to the specifics and frequency of the problems at Basil's garden, described above, the gardeners also rely on police and park rangers to deal with people who do these things. With the camping incidents, Basil explains that the gardeners decided that they do not have the training or resources to help the people who need housing:

"It's a real problem because we have those people there who obviously need housing, need to be connected to the social services, we don't have the expertise to do that. ... We don't want the [garden] to turn into one big campground for homeless folks ... it's not sustainable. ... We don't have the ability to fix the problem, the larger problem." (Basil, 2016)

In terms of theft, the participants all said that none of the gardeners mind people taking a little from their garden. Bok Choy's and Crocus's gardens have plants that are outside of the fence which are free for anybody's picking. Crocus said that the gardeners at their garden would be happy to share their harvest if someone came and asked for food. "This does happen, believe it or not, from time to time. [Someone will come and say:] 'What do you got? I'm really hungry.'" (Crocus, 2016). Crocus's garden also has an informal agreement about placing excess produce near the shed with a note that explains that this is free produce. In Bok Choy's garden, some gardeners try to grow plants that might deceive potential thieves into thinking that they are not ripe, or edible, to deter people from taking the harvest. However, this does not eliminate theft entirely (Bok Choy, 2016). Shiso hopes that by creating signage that explains what the garden is about, they can reduce theft: "let people know that this is a garden and if they want to take something maybe they can [come help out] instead of removing all our carrots" (Shiso, 2016). Crocus

also hopes that people in the community can “just ... let people know, pass the word out there, that stealing from your neighbours isn't cool. Unless you're starving or really hungry.” (Crocus, 2016). The usual way participants report their gardeners dealing with theft is by accepting that ‘these things happen’, ‘you can't really avoid it’, “if you're gardening in public it's gonna happen.” (Crocus, 2016).

Despite all of the issues that community gardens face, among all of the participants there is a strong refusal to enclose their gardens physically. Basil, having described all of the aforementioned problems of their garden, said: “Those are our problems. But we feel like we're part of the community. We're not here to keep people out.” (Basil, 2016). Crocus similarly expressed that when their gardeners tell them of instances of theft: “Maybe they're [the gardeners are] expecting me to do something about it, but all I can really do is listen to their story and listen to their concern, because we can't put a lock on the gate and we can't hire a security guard” (Crocus, 2016). Bok Choy discussed the necessity of seeing their community garden as a public space, and of making sure that the garden is non-exclusionary.

The participants all suggested that any problems that the garden faces are just taken in stride, as part of doing things in public. They not only notice people interacting with their gardens negatively, but also positively. The interviewees often saw an upside to people littering, leaving cigarette butts and beer cans: “But they do use this space. I'm hoping that having this little bit of garden actually adds to the space.” (Shiso, 2016). Crocus recalled a story of a public art project that was installed in Crocus's garden.

“We're just letting it age naturally. We haven't had too much vandalism. In the first few years we had a little bit of vandalism ... But over the years, even that has kind of tailed off. ... And it's never, touch wood, it's never been tagged. Because the graffiti artists – they are artists after all! – and they respect somebody else's artwork. It's never been tagged in 22 years.” (Crocus, 2016)

Relationships with the municipal government

The City of Vancouver⁷ has not always been supportive of community gardening, and today it is not always responsive or transparent with the community garden

⁷ The City of Vancouver is the entire municipal government of Vancouver. One branch of the City of Vancouver consists of the City Council, Mayor, and City Manager. This branch is a separate entity

organizers. A few of the participants reported that municipal government had a staff member who was the liaison with all of the community gardens. This position appears to have changed, and the participants are unsure of who is now in that position. (Did you check this independently?) One of the interviewees said that for some of the people who used to be in that position, "I got the feeling that they didn't really get the whole CG thing. So I'm really anxious to know who this person is, and whether they are going to have more hours, less hours, what they expect." Another interviewee described that the "Parks Board has been really good to us. They used to be bad to us in the past". In the past, the interviewee said, the person in charge of community gardens was not interested in supporting community gardens. Now "the tide is really turned. It's probably Robertson [Mayor Gregor Robertson], kind of changed the culture."

One of the interviewees has concerns that the municipal government will try to make decisions without community gardens without the gardeners' input. They describe a situation that occurred when the Board of Parks and Recreation began to create community garden guidelines and the community gardeners became involved. Many gardeners were against a proposed rule of limiting gardeners' memberships to five years, in order to resolve the issue of long waitlists. The participant described the process as the Parks Board getting "some pretty strong feedback from people that had had a little bit of experience with community gardening at that point". The participant explained the arguments for why a five-year membership limit is a bad idea: "That's just punishment, that's just cruel. Because they put in all that effort, in some cases it's a lot of effort, and after five years you tell 'em, you're gone. Where's the incentive then to do a good job?". On a smaller scale, the City today, in some situations, does not ask or listen. When a mugging occurred near Basil's garden, the city had the trees which allowed the mugger to commit the crime undetected had their branches removed up 20 feet. The city did not consult or ask the gardeners about this (Basil, 2016). Shiso reports that their garden has a big issue with water access, and they have tried to ask the City for assistance through email, with no results. Shiso takes this in stride, explaining that they "understand, it's a

from the Board of Parks and Recreation, another branch of municipal government. Both the City of Vancouver and the Board of Parks and Recreation have policies with regard to how community gardens should be started and run, and which policy is applied based on whether the garden is to be on City land or Park land.

little garden ... And it's really expensive to do plumbing or redo [the] water here." (Shiso, 2016).

However, most of the participants acknowledged and appreciated the City of Vancouver's support, given both previously and presently. Crocus has the impression that the Parks Board has grown to appreciate the community garden that Crocus oversees, "despite their initial skepticism". Crocus in turn appreciates that "At least they gave us the chance to use it [the land], and they gave us the chance to succeed or fall on our face. I gotta give them that." (Crocus, 2016). Bok Choy's garden was created with assistance in siting and planning from the City of Vancouver. A few of the participants said that they believe that the increased interest in supporting community gardening is coming from the Greenest City 2020 Action Plan:

"they have an application process, they do so many gardens a year, they want to see more gardens built wherever they can, so whether it's park space, whether it's private developments, school gardens... The City, because of the Greenest City Action Plan, is really interested in increasing all forms of urban agriculture, including CGs." (Bok Choy, 2016)

They also cited the Vancouver Food Policy Board and a couple of individuals from the Vancouver municipal government who pushed for more creation, promotion, and support of community gardens in the city. However, the Greenest City Action Plan was most often mentioned as producing a big shift.

The sentiment for the municipal government's involved in the community gardens is somewhat varied. Nettle (2014) wrote: "Community garden activists have sought to create alternative systems, institutions and cultural practices within or alongside the state and the market that are not reliant on them, or at least challenge their centrality." (p. 169). Some of the participants would agree with this statement, explaining that their self-governance and independent decision-making was valuable to them. Crocus stated that in other cities in Canada, with the example of Toronto, the city was much more central and involved: "I've heard you have to call a city number to get on a list [waitlist for plot]. Here, you call the individual gardens." Crocus believes that aside from certain situations, "If we do our job, and they do their job, and we don't mess up too much on either end, then there is no need for us to be in that much contact with them." (Crocus, 2016).

The participants also suggested that based the way they operate now, if municipal government was no longer interested in supporting community gardens, they would be able to continue. Basil commented that "The garden has survived for 25 years outside of a partnership, with a city government that ... was very right-wing, conservative, city government, and we fought. It was all about fighting." (Basil, 2016). Crocus similarly believes that community gardens, if under threat and particularly if under threat of losing their independence, will mobilise: "I think the ... various gardens will certainly fight for that." (Crocus, 2016). On the other hand, Nettle (2014) has found that their interviewees also did not all categorically refuse to work with government. Nettle drew the conclusion that "It is ... necessary to recognize that prefigurative practices can be used in concert with policy-oriented approaches." (p. 180). Hence, it is possible that Vancouver's community gardeners do not necessarily have to be 'fighting the power' in order to be considered practitioners of prefigurative practices.

The need and desire to keep gardens 'pretty'

All of the participants spoke of the necessity and desire to keep their gardens "aesthetically pleasing". They reasoned that the City requires community gardens to keep a certain level of maintenance, but also said that the gardeners generally want to have a beautiful garden. Crocus says that they would probably lose their lease if they failed to do basic maintenance. They contrasted their garden with a "manicured park" like Van Dusen, saying that this level of maintenance is "not who we are". However, the gardeners "try to meet minimum standards that we feel are acceptable to the community ... It may not be a hundred percent perfect or as manicured as some people would like but it seems to be okay with most people." (Crocus, 2016). Bok Choy similarly has expressed that they know that the City wants to keep the gardens looking 'presentable', "they don't want the backlash from the community, why do you have this community garden, there's vermin, there's smells ... also we want to make sure that... that the space is being used productively, and it's not just overgrown." (Bok Choy, 2016).

The gardeners also want to maintain their garden to a certain standard, taking charge of common areas, and sometimes even taking on plots that don't belong to them. Bok Choy reports that some of their gardeners take on neighbouring plots when "it's quite clear that their neighbour is not tending the plot", sometimes with permission from the person responsible for the plot, and sometimes without. Bok Choy says that the reason

for this is “Because people within the garden, I think, want it to look nice. I think it bothers some gardeners that things are going to seed, they see it as a waste. ... and the space should be taken care of.” (Bok Choy, 2016). At some of the participants’ gardens, maintenance of common areas is done during work parties. At Bok Choy’s garden, there are work parties “where everyone comes and does something to maintain the garden. ... There’s always some major project”, but some people also regularly take care of a specific area or task: “There’s one woman in particular that takes care of that quadrant over there, so that sometimes looks like the nicest quadrant”, “a couple of guys that are really fantastic about maintenance, ... really excellent maintenance people that will go in and fix something, like if a planter gets broken or something, if fencing needs mending.” (Bok Choy, 2016).

The garden’s appearance can also be seen as a gift to the neighbourhood, or an advertisement for the garden. Crocus, like the other participants, expressed the sentiment that they hope, and believe, that the community around the garden likes to have the garden. “The feedback we get is from the community, including the non-gardening community that just come by and visit, is that they’re happy to have it here.” (Crocus, 2016). On the other hand, Nasturtium spoke of the difficulties of running a garden which doesn’t have aesthetic appeal. One of the challenges was that the garden had a rat infestation, which resulted in “A lot of bad press, and I don’t think that it did the garden well. ” (Nasturtium, 2016). To be true, Bok Choy also suspects that their garden has attracted more rats to the area than there were before – it “happens, just because there’s a food source for them, and a nesting source.” (Bok Choy, 2016). Nasturtium noted again how the aesthetic pleasure some gardens and urban farms produce helps in their image, describing “some enormous urban farms that are very striking and very visual, and you can really see them, I think that it does a lot.” (Nasturtium, 2016). When Nasturtium’s garden had empty plots, Nasturtium experienced difficulties with plots that were overgrown, needed weeding, and overall “look ratty”. Nasturtium believes that an unpleasant-looking garden repels people. When the garden is at full occupancy and all the gardeners do their part in maintaining their plots, the “waitlist grows, the garden looks so much better, you see people around.” (Nasturtium, 2016). Ultimately, Bok Choy says, a garden that is well-maintained is a functional garden. “Because the point of it is to garden, produce food I guess, or flowers if that’s what you want.” (Bok Choy, 2016)

Beliefs and ethics that guide the garden

The participants expressed different ethics, beliefs, and reasons for doing things the way they are done with regard to their community gardens. The participants expressed that unnecessary waste is a negative thing. Crocus says that in their garden, to construct trellises⁸ and other structures, “The ethic here is more like recycling, and reusing ... this is more like about being creative with what you got, and saving stuff that people throw out in the alleys and the dumpsters and putting it to work here.” (Crocus, 2016). Sometimes, gardeners run out of energy at the end of the season and don’t put enough work into their plot, resulting in rotting produce. Crocus comments that “It’s a bit sad, it’s a bit wasteful”, and that a solution is to give away the produce to friends or a hungry person. Crocus noted that there is the informal agreement that if a gardener has excess produce, they can leave it by the shed with a note that designates the produce as free (Crocus, 2016).

Gardeners understand their ownership, or rather, renting, of garden plots differently. Bok Choy says that some of their gardeners think of the plot as ‘theirs’: “this is my plot, and I’ve paid my twenty dollars ... I will let it go wild if I want.” This is a view that Bok Choy contends with: “it’s not yours, it’s all of ours, and if you’re going to take it in, let someone else take over it.” (Bok Choy, 2016) Bok Choy’s view is much more about the idea that if you are a community gardener, you must share with at least some communal responsibilities – in this case, maintaining your plot actively and not letting it go to seed.

Nasturtium reports that despite the fact that their garden is temporary, with all the gardeners aware that their plots could be “ripped up” and gone within a month any time, there are “people who have gardened with us for three or four years and have epic garden plots”. The precariousness is simply “the reality that everyone lives with” (Nasturtium, 2016). People’s willingness to garden regardless of this situation suggests that it is less about the result of grown produce and more about the process.

The City of Vancouver and non-profit organizations in Vancouver certainly have reasons to support community gardens. The participants suggested that gardens can be a way to showcase “sustainability and greening of the city, because it’s a way for people to connect with sustainability in a very pleasant way, and in a way that everyone likes.

⁸ A structure used to display or support the growth of climbing plants, such as shrubs or peas.

Everyone likes to see a nice, ripe tomato.” (Bok Choy, 2016). Shiso said it’s possible that the reason the garden was created is because

“they were trying to push for more people growing food in the area ... [to show that] You have this space here which is not quite like real garden space, it’s long and narrow, but you can still make it functional. You can still grow food here. It’s not just a piece of land, you can make things with it.” (Shiso, 2016)

In this sense, the garden is not about its final outcome, which is food production, but about creating a certain space with which non-gardeners can interact as much as gardeners. Nettle (2014), through their analysis of Australian community gardener interviews using social movement theory, argues that

“By growing food in urban spaces, community garden activists’ saw themselves as presenting an alternative to industrial agrifood systems. By developing systems of collective land management, they saw themselves as presenting an alternative to dominant models of public space management. By producing festivals and cultural events that celebrate place and community, they saw themselves as presenting an alternative to consumerism and alienation.” (p. 172).

The community gardens show that alternatives to what we have now are possible, that it’s possible to live a little differently, to a little bit more sustainably.

Bok Choy explained that it’s likely that the municipal government similarly “want to showcase ... how food can be situated within cities. ... there is a recognition that are ways of gardening in the city, but for Vancouver the struggles are really around space.” (Bok Choy, 2016). Bok Choy discussed how densification is producing the sense of loss, because people are unable to grow anything due to lack of space. When asked about temporary gardens, Bok Choy commented that while it “would be nice if the City made more land available for gardening, ... they’re also under multiple pressures”, so the creation of temporary gardens “makes sense in Vancouver”. The fact that land in Vancouver is so expensive brings more people to gardens because they often can not garden in their apartments, condos, or multi-family housing. However, that is not the only factor bringing people to garden. Nasturtium commented: “I just think that there’s just a real culture around it. ... Michael Pollan, food blogs.” (Nasturtium, 2016). Bok Choy would be in agreement, saying that “larger societal drivers” are pushing people to join community gardens: “there’s interest in food, this local food, the relocalization of food, everyone wants to get back into gardening.” (Bok Choy, 2016).

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

The method used in this research process has never been perfect, because in any kind of research there are limitations. When this research was as complete as it can be, some reflections on the method followed. The aspects of the research design that worked well were interviewing while visiting the garden. This allowed me to see in real time what the participant was describing, and to get a sense of the space. Getting a sense of the space was useful to understand that the physical space is important for how people engage with the garden. Additionally, I believe that being in their own space allowed the participants to recall (?) the information they wanted to share more easily. I hope that it also made them more comfortable during the interviews. I did not want to be the person in charge, and maybe being in the participants' space 'levelled the playing field' somewhat. The way the interviews were conducted was productive. The interviews were semi-structured, and I made a conscious effort to allow the participants to speak of what they thought was important or pertinent. I tried to make the interview seem as much like a conversation as I could. Having an audio recorder helped, because I did not need to take active notes. In terms of privacy, sending potential participants a full invitation via email allowed them to remain anonymous if they did not wish to participate in the research. If I were to repeat this research project, I would make the interview questions more focused on the gardeners themselves – for example, more specifics on demographic indicators, or what values do they hold with regard to gardening.

A series of interviews with a larger scope would be useful for understanding Vancouver's community gardens, whether they are sites of activism and how they can be supported. Due to East Vancouver's activist past, it may be that this is an exceptional area of the city for studying social movements or activism – interviews from other neighbourhoods outside of East Van could inform us whether it can be said that community gardens in Vancouver generally are activist spaces. It may also be productive to step away from the qualitative and toward the quantitative. For example, it would be interesting to see the analysis of data based on data about neighbourhoods and about community gardens. This could answer questions such as: What percentage of Vancouver's residents are registered at a community garden? Does the percentage of

non-White gardeners correspond with the total percentage of non-White residents? Do some neighbourhoods have a higher percentage of population registered at a community garden?

When I began researching this topic, I saw community gardens as the means to an end. However, I came to the same conclusion that has been voiced by both Claire Nettle and Bok Choy:

“Community gardens do not produce fruit and vegetables on anywhere near the scale necessary to substantially supplement, let alone replace, the dominant food system” (Nettle, 2014, p. 190)

“... not that the garden is going to make people food self-sufficient”.
(Bok Choy, 2016)

Nettle’s (2014) analysis of community gardens has focused on gardens where “collaborative creation of new gardens, culture, values and community structures is a conscious strategy to achieve broader political aims.” (p. 184). My analysis has considered, on a smaller scale and transported to Vancouver, Canada, whether the communication practices of and at community gardens may indicate their participation in activism for a better society. Nettle wrote that the interviewees in their research “did not generally believe that community gardens provided a complete or sufficient response to all of the issues they sought to address (and there were many), but talked of being ‘part of the solution’.” (p. 173). Being part of the solution means working with other movements to create a better alternative to what we have now.

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