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Introducing a Longitudinal Study of Community Gardeners and Gardens in New York City

For almost a decade, the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation GreenThumb program has collected data about hundreds of New York City community gardens citywide to understand how these gardens function. Building on a data set that includes surveys and interviews conducted periodically with garden representatives since 2003, GreenThumb and USDA Forest Service researchers have conducted a new round of community garden interviews examining membership, programming, partnerships, and motivations for gardening. This comprehensive study of the largest community gardening program in the United States aims to understand the evolving role of community gardens in New York City. The study asks: From 2003-2011, is gardeners' motivation for creating and participating in community gardens persistent or changing? How do the use and social functions of community gardens evolve or remain the same? What sort of programs and community events are held in gardens? How has garden membership changed over time? Is membership increasing, decreasing, or staying the same? Who participates in gardening in neighborhoods with changing demographics? During the summer of 2011, structured interviews were conducted by phone with representatives from a sample of 102 community gardens for which survey data existed from 2003, 2007, and 2009. These research findings will help assess the ways in which New York City community gardens have evolved and can continue to grow in the future.

Keywords
Community gardens, motivations, programming

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Research Note

Established in 1978, the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation GreenThumb program (GreenThumb) is the nation's largest urban gardening program, assisting hundreds of neighborhood groups with the creation and maintenance of community gardens citywide. Building on a data set that includes surveys and interviews conducted periodically with garden representatives since 2003, GreenThumb and USDA Forest Service researchers have conducted a new round of community garden interviews examining membership, programming, partnerships, and motivations for gardening. This comprehensive longitudinal study aims to understand the evolving role of community gardens in New York City.

Other recent citywide analyses have focused on the physical attributes of the garden in terms of plants grown and food produced (Farming Concrete 2011) or the physical potential for and constraints surrounding urban agriculture (UDL 2011); this study focuses on the social motivation of gardeners and the social functions of the gardens. Moreover, it provides a comprehensive study of the largest community gardening program in United States, which serves over 8,000 registered garden members in more than 500 gardens citywide (Stone 2009). The study seeks to understand the persistent and shifting role of community gardens. Thus, it responds to criticism that prior studies are anecdotal or small scale (Lawson 2005); this is a longitudinal study of 102 garden groups over the course of 8 years.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study seeks to answer questions that support GreenThumb's on-going program evaluation as well as scientific research designed to explore the shifting nature of community-based stewardship. From 2003-2011, is gardeners' motivation for creating and participating in community gardens persistent or changing? How do the use and social functions of community gardens evolve or remain the same? What sort of programs and community events are held in gardens? How has garden membership changed over time? Is membership increasing, decreasing, or staying the same? Who participates in gardening in neighborhoods with changing demographics? These findings will help assess the ways in which New York City community gardens have evolved and can continue to grow in the future.

A number of hypotheses are being explored in this study. In terms of gardener motivation, two competing hypotheses are plausible. Gardeners may express a consistent set of motivations for gardening such as: to meet neighbors, improve their neighborhoods, enjoy nature, relax, socialize, feed their families, and provide food for others (Shinew et al 2004); or to support well-being, relax, mitigate the stress of changes/transitions, respond to neighborhood crises, strengthen social cohesion, or share knowledge and leave a legacy (Svendsen 2009; See also, Westphal 1999, 2003). It is also possible that gardener motivations change over time in response to conditions in the neighborhood, the city, and shifting societal priorities. New garden leaders may express different motivations from a previous generation of gardeners that were involved in the founding of gardens in the 1970s and 1980s.

In terms of neighborhood change, we hypothesize that changing demographics may cause a change in garden membership and activities. In particular, neighborhoods with an increase in

population or population density will lead to increase in number of garden members. In addition, gardens where new ethnic or immigrant groups begin to participate, garden activities will change in response to these new participant population's cultural and agricultural practices. In terms of programming, garden social events consistently support local community development needs often going beyond growing food and flowers to include activities such as recreation, education, youth programming, arts, seniors, and cultural events (Stone 2009). We hypothesize that changes in local/ neighborhood development will trigger a change in garden activities. Finally, as gardens mature, we hypothesize that they increase their programming and community partnerships or external networks.

Methods

Between June and September 2011, structured interviews were conducted by phone with primary garden contacts who serve as garden representatives from a sample of 102 community gardens for which survey data existed from 2003, 2007, and 2009. Three attempts were made for each interview, with an overall response rate of 85% and a refusal rate of less than 1%. These interview data are currently being transcribed and closed-questions are being coded and entered into a database that will later be shared with GreenThumb.

Researchers will conduct quantitative analysis of membership patterns, garden organizational structure, and programming. Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions about gardener motivation and neighborhood change will be conducted through coding of emergent themes using dual coders. Researchers will also conduct spatial analysis of changes over time in demographics of the census blocks in which gardens are located. Variables currently being explored include household income, home ownership, vacancy rates, and education. These data will come from the 2000 and 2010 census.

Taken together, data on gardener motivations, garden membership and social functions, demographics, and local land use and development patterns will provide information about how community gardens reflect and respond to changing neighborhood conditions.

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