Community Gardens: An Exploration of Urban Agriculture in the Bronx, New York City

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Community Gardens: An Exploration of Urban Agriculture in the Bronx, New York City

Urban agriculture/community gardening in the Bronx has multiple roles, including health-promoting, economic, environmental, and cultural. These roles are particularly important in light of urban sustainability issues and environmental justice concerns, such as differential access to open space, recreation, and fresh produce in poorer communities and communities of color, as well as differential environmental and health impacts of unsustainable practices on these communities. The gardens generally help promote a sense of place - a focus for communities - which often have little access to safe parks or recreational space within their neighborhoods, and create a center for community cultural and educational activities. The Bronx currently has about 175 community gardens administered by Operation Green Thumb, as well as a number of community gardens operated by non-profit entities, such as the Parks Council, and community gardens on private property. On average, the Bronx community gardens use about 75% of their land for growing vegetables, and many gardens supply the farming families and others in the neighborhood with much of their vegetables for the year. This study investigates urban agricultural practices in the Bronx to assess how community gardens improve quality-of-life for the proximate populations. Through semi-structured interviews of the gardeners, visits to observe the gardens, and a spatial analysis of community socio-demographic characteristics using Geographic Information System (GIS), we examine the social, political, cultural, environmental, food security, and health benefits of community gardening. This is part of a larger study comparing urban agricultural practices in the Bronx and Curitiba, Brazil.

Keywords
quality of life, productive landscaping, exploratory research.
Community Gardens:
An Exploration of Urban Agriculture in the Bronx, New York City

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Introduction

Urban agriculture/community gardening in the Bronx has multiple roles, including health-promoting, economic, environmental, and cultural. These roles are particularly important in light of urban sustainability issues and environmental justice concerns, such as differential access to open space, recreation, and fresh produce in poorer communities and communities of color, as well as differential environmental and health impacts of unsustainable practices on these communities. The gardens generally help promote a sense of place – a focus for communities which often have little access to safe parks or recreational places within their neighborhoods and create a center for community cultural and educational activities. The Bronx currently has about 175 community gardens administered by Operation Green Thumb, as well as 206 community gardens operated by non-profits, such as the Parks Council, and community gardens on private property (Maantay, accessed 2002).

In view of these facts, the scope of this project is to study, explore and describe the Urban Agriculture and Productive Landscaping in an alternative way to frame urban problems and to reveal the gardeners’ perception of quality of life improvements. The work is focused in the Community Gardens of the Bronx, New York, and is part of a comparative multi case study of different urban realities: the Bronx, New York, and the Fanny Neighborhood Community, located in Curitiba, PR, Brazil. In this Brazilian neighborhood the study targeted urban agriculture as practiced in home gardens.

Methodology

The study is being conducted through semi-structured interviews with the gardeners and by visiting and observing the Community Gardens. The analyzed domain will be a self-selection sample (only the gardeners willing to accept being interviewed) out of the 93 active non-school Community Gardens listed as under the jurisdiction of the NYC Park Department’s Operation Green Thumb. In addition, survey data (bibliographic research, analysis of documentation, reports, laws, etc.) and mapping and spatial analysis of the Community Gardens’ proximity neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics using GIS (Geographic Information Sciences) was also included as part of the research. The study is currently on-going and presents the data from the 10 Community Gardens visited and interviews with 32 gardeners.

Results

For the Community Gardens that have been visited so far in the Bronx (n=19): 53% of them grow predominately vegetables, 15% grow flowers, 14% grow vegetables and flowers, 12% grow flowers and vegetables approximately, the same amounts, and 5% have mostly trees in the garden. Just two of the 10 Community Gardens visited sell their produce in farmers markets located in the community. Most of the 93 gardeners interviewed (82%) share no less than half of their harvest, and 31% of the interviewed gardeners shared more than half. Usually they share with friends, neighbors, people from community or another member of the gardens. When asked about the benefits they have in their lives by participating in urban agriculture in the Community Gardens, 46% of the gardeners answered “easy closer to the family,” “neighborhood beautification,” and “family health.” The gardeners’ perception about how the Community Gardens have improved their quality of life is very positive, including that they can grow many more foods producing healthy nature and active recreation. When they were asked about the challenges they are facing to keep the gardens visible, most of them answered that they have problems with maintaining the vegetation, vandalism and the constant threat of potential removal from the gardens by the city. The lack of secure tenure and long-term protection of many Community Gardens was also pointed as a problem by Tanaka and Krasny (2004) in a study about Latino Community Gardens in NY.

The socio-demographic analysis of the community gardens yields some interesting results as well. While some of the variables seem not to carry any potential relationships with respect to productivity to community gardens (such as commuting time and citizenship, other variables, such as ethnicity, linguistic isolation, educational attainment, and poverty, are worth further exploration. There is a significantly higher frequency/census population living in proximity to community gardens, and higher in schools located in the community. The linguistic isolation and poverty are both higher within walking distance to the community gardens, and a large part of the population living within walking distance to the gardens did not finish high school.

Conclusion

The study is on-going, but so far we can conclude that the activity of growing vegetables and other plants is also a way to socialize within their neighborhood, and it is very important for the social reproduction of the community in the Bronx. In addition, the transport of produce to the city is an important issue that the gardeners are facing. Community Gardens provide a place for the community to come together, and contribute to the urban environment but also to create a place where the gardeners and others in the community “feel at home.” There is a strong need to continue the consensus with all the stake-holders involved about these places can be protected and how the community can preserve them.

Socio-demographic variables that characterize areas in close proximity to community gardens may also help to better understand who use community gardens and why. Further analysis of these data may offer additional resources critical for promoting and protecting these important community spaces.

References


