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# Cultivating an Opportunity: Access and Inclusion in Seattle's Community Gardens

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**CULTIVATING AN OPPORTUNITY:  
ACCESS AND INCLUSION IN SEATTLE'S COMMUNITY GARDENS**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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## Acknowledgements

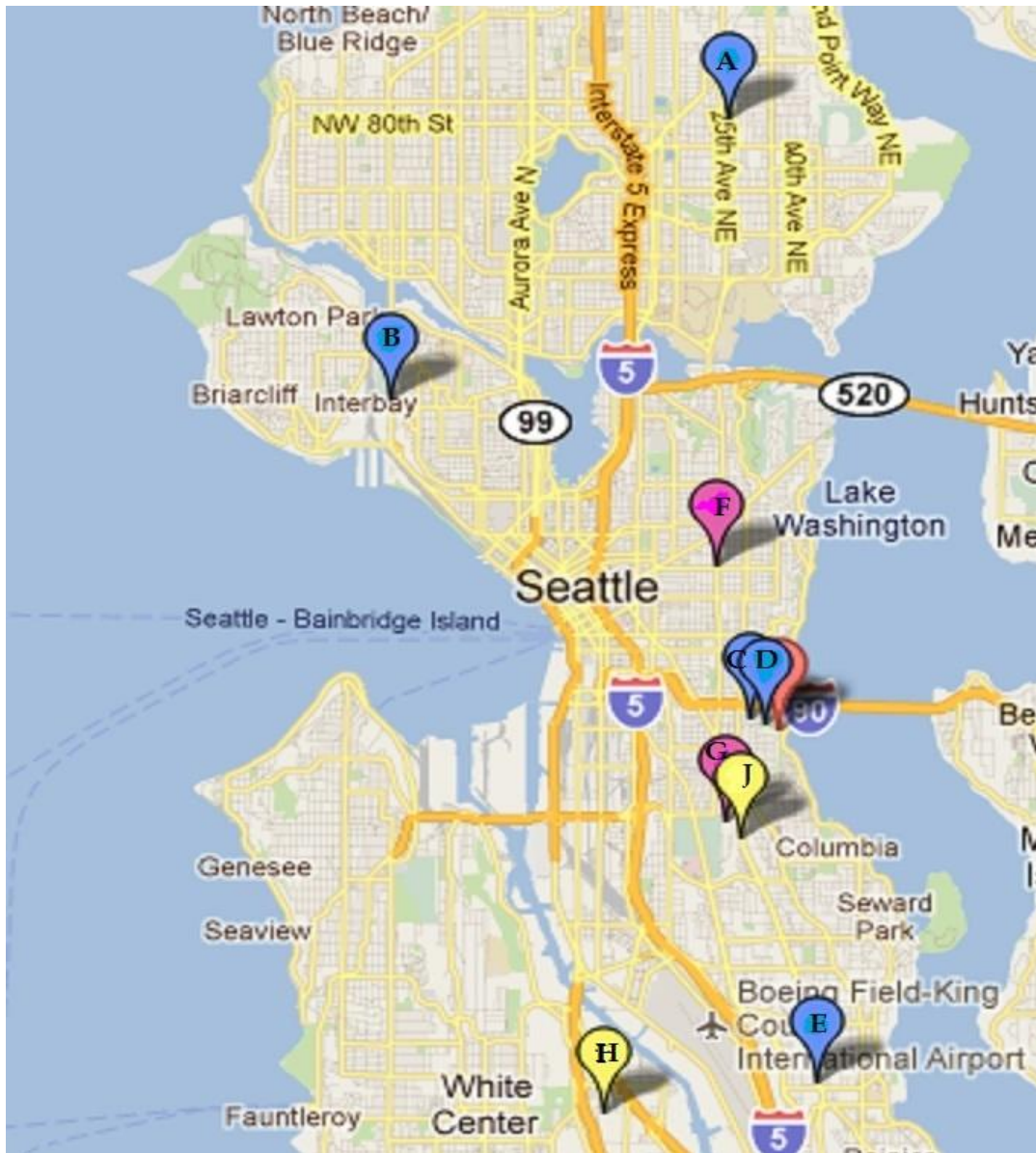
This thesis was especially rewarding because of all the motivation and inspiration that Seattle's community gardening activists exude in their very being. Thank you Amber Banks of Alleycat Acres, Kenya Freddie of the P-Patch Program and Robin DeCook of Lettuce Link for your time and allowing me an inside look at what you do.

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## Map of Seattle Community Gardens Discussed



A Picardo P-Patch

B Interbay P-Patch

C Bradner Garden P-Patch

D Colman Park

E Thistle P-Patch

F Alleycat Acres – Central District

G Alleycat Acres - Beacon Hill

H Marra Farm – Lettuce Link

J Seattle Community Farm – Lettuce Link



## Introduction

As a child, one of my most vivid memories is of walking during summer or fall evenings with my family through our Mt. Baker neighborhood in Seattle, heading down through the park to the lake. This was one of our standard routes, and it happened to take us through a big, terraced P-Patch (Seattle's term for a city-owned community garden) before putting us back on the path to Lake Washington. One night in particular--it must have been in early summer because of the raspberries--I wandered over and started picking some berries from a bush on someone's plot. My dad came over and showed me a big sign that said not to pick the produce growing in other people's gardens, and I remember feeling absolutely *sure* that I was going to be arrested, that this was a major offense and was the end of my free life. My dad apparently did not try too hard to comfort me, since I remember the feeling to this day.

Despite this trauma, however, this story illustrates one idea of how a community garden should function in an urban neighborhood. Although my family did not have our own plot, the garden was a part of our routine, a sacred space of my childhood; wandering through it was just as much fun as the destination, the lake. It felt distinct from the rest of the walk, and we would always say hello to whoever was working there in the evenings and take a look at what they were growing. The P-Patch was not only a place for those without a yard to grow food and flowers, but a green space for the surrounding neighborhood and a place to connect with neighbors. The space was a public/private fusion, where we as a family were freely able to enjoy the garden as a place of recreation, but the produce and fruits of the gardener's labor were theirs alone. The garden was able to serve multiple purposes in an urban neighborhood. This is a fairly simple idea, but the goals and rhetoric surrounding the purpose community gardens includes these and



many more concepts as these gardens have evolved physically and ideologically in increasingly diverse ways over the decades.

A public/private fusion is just one example of the types of big ideas that community gardens have become engaged in over the last few decades. Community gardens are growing in popularity as more groups begin to see them as a method of direct action to confront issues of sustainable urbanism, of re-engaging people with the environment and food production in a post-industrial era, and of food justice. Food justice is a large and multi-faceted issue, but it can be condensed as attempt to holistically address of problems of environment, equity and economics. As Robert Gottlieb describes it, food justice seeks to “transform where, what and how food is grown, produced, transported, accessed and eaten.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, this description does not simplify the issue very much, as that sort of definition includes almost every kind of activist group from public health to urban sustainability, as well as a spectrum of environmental groups. But this is part of the beauty of the food-justice movement: the goals are relevant and apply to *everyone*. As one Seattle garden organizer, Sue McGann, would ask of each volunteer group: “Raise your hand if you eat food!”

Everyone does and this is why activists have increasingly chosen to use food and gardening as a representation of the many social and environmental changes that they are trying to bring about in modern cities. Food-justice theory links many different kinds of activists, for these are issues of anti-poverty, environment, urban greening, urban planning, public health, workers’ rights, celebration of diversity and many other types of work.<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I attempt to use the model of Seattle community gardens through three case studies –the City of Seattle P-Patch program (the original); Marra Farm and Lettuce Link (the established alternative); and

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<sup>1</sup>Gottlieb, Robert, and Anupama Joshi. *Food Justice*. MIT, 2010. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Gottlieb, 2010.

Alleycat Acres and the Seattle Community Farm (the new evolution of gardens) to show how organization history and policies affect community participation, sustainability of the program, and success of this type of organization within a ecological and just city.

Briefly, I find that Seattle has a special circumstance in the support lent to the community gardens by city government, not only through the P-Patch program which is run by the city, but also through very garden-friendly policies. Even amongst these three case studies, there is a range of how the surrounding neighborhoods are included in each of these programs, and this inclusion is largely due to how the organizations go about structuring their program to account for the community's needs. There is no strict pattern shown for what specifically needs to occur for a gardening program to be successful, but a conscious, critical outlook on the part of the organizations is essential for the inclusion of diverse groups of people and the representation of the hot community. However, the communities to which the programs need to reach out is evolving – in an increasingly connected city, is it logical to strive for a 'locals-only' garden, as Lettuce Link's Seattle Community Farm is? Or is it preferable to accept that there are multiple stakeholders in modern community gardens, including the online communities which are cultivated on social networking sites, as is the case with Alleycat Acres? It is clear from a deep look at each of these three examples, which represent a non-linear history of community gardens in Seattle, that this movement is growing--an undoubtedly positive thing, as broadening services can increase access to healthy food for more people as specific niches are filled by different programs. But the organizers will have to remain critical of the process through which this network is grown, so as to make the best of this opportunity to create a more sustainable, equal city. But before these topics are tackled, I will provide background on how and why community gardening as a movement emerged.

## *An Unjust Food System*

The primary problem with our food system today is the level of industrialization in how it is produced, processed and transported and how these processes cause ill effects on the workers, consumers and environment. Conventional agriculture is an attempt to fit what is a very nonlinear, cyclical, complicated process – agriculture - into a linear, streamlined formula: a production-line, factory-farm system, favoring efficiency over ecological and social reality. From the start, rampant use of pesticides and fertilizers in the fields threaten the health of the farm workers, consumers and the surrounding ecosystem. An average of 3 lbs of pesticides are applied to U.S. fields per year, per person, some of which have been linked to developmental disorders, cancer and other health problems<sup>3</sup> and as these chemicals leach into groundwater or the excess nitrogen into our waterways both our health and environmental health is further threatened.<sup>4</sup> Cruel and unsanitary living conditions for feedlot animals, and overuse of antibiotics also poses a further health risk for consumers and workers.<sup>5</sup> The transportation, packaging and processing of food also emits large amounts of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, further fueling climate change.<sup>6</sup> This is a very brief description of the myriad and serious problems happening from the seed to the grocery store.<sup>7</sup> But what happens thereafter, in the cities and in people's kitchens, continues to be troubling.

After the food reaches the grocery store or a restaurant, the problems continue. First, where is this grocery store, or more importantly, where *isn't* it? Access to good, nutritious food

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<sup>3</sup> *What's On My Food?: Pesticides On Food*. Web. 24 Sept. 2011. <<http://whatsonmyfood.org>>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Food System & Global Warming." *Cool Foods Campaign*. Web. 07 Dec. 2011. <[http://coolfoodscampaign.org/what\\_you\\_need\\_to\\_know/the-food-system-global-warming/](http://coolfoodscampaign.org/what_you_need_to_know/the-food-system-global-warming/)>.

<sup>5</sup> "About the Issues." *Official Food, Inc. Movie Site*. Web. 07 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.foodincmovie.com/about-the-issues.php>>.

<sup>6</sup> "The Food System & Global Warming." *Cool Foods Campaign*. Web. 07 Dec. 2011. <[http://coolfoodscampaign.org/what\\_you\\_need\\_to\\_know/the-food-system-global-warming/](http://coolfoodscampaign.org/what_you_need_to_know/the-food-system-global-warming/)>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, Robert Gottlieb's *Food Justice*, or Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* provide in-depth history factory farming.

is one of the key issues of the food-justice movement. As grocery stores move out of low-income neighborhoods creating what are known as food deserts, the residents of these areas have decreasing opportunity to buy produce and fresh foods, and are left with the options at their local convenience store or fast food restaurant.<sup>8</sup> Worse, the processed foods sold in these stores tend to be less healthy and more expensive, and if the option for produce is available, the price per calorie between the fresh versus processed food makes the processed item a seemingly more logical choice.<sup>9</sup>

These food deserts have been documented in numerous studies nation-wide, found in low-income neighborhoods in most urban areas.<sup>10</sup> Even where grocery supermarkets do exist, connecting the dots between existence and actually providing public transportation for the residents of low-income neighborhoods to access these stores is lacking, further contributing to the food insecurity in these urban neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> As Rachel Slocum, in her article on anti-racist food work explains, “Food insecurity is present when people cannot obtain foods in sufficient quality and quantity to sustain health, well-being and culture, yet they have easier access to foods that promote obesity and related illnesses.”<sup>12</sup> These factors are all fairly reasonable, but the one that may appear more surprising is her inclusion of the importance of sustaining people’s *culture* alongside more standard issues of health and access.

This third major facet of food justice is recreating the link between people and food. Many find that the disconnection between cultivation and consumption of food is intrinsic to the problems we are facing in our food system--questions of where is the food coming from? What steps did it have to take to get from a raw product into my breakfast cereal? Where does the

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<sup>8</sup> Gottlieb, Robert. *Food Justice*.

<sup>9</sup> Gottlieb, Robert.

<sup>10</sup> Gottlieb

<sup>11</sup> Gottlieb

<sup>12</sup> Slocum, Rachel. “Anti-Racist Practice and the Work of Community Food Organizations.” *Antipode*, 2006.

second half of the hamburger that I couldn't finish go when I throw it in the garbage? The idea is that if people are more conscious about how their actions affect the environment and other people, they will be able to make better choices (if possible). As Jules Pretty notes:

In the earliest tests on European farming, agriculture was interpreted as two connected things: *agri* and *cultura*, and food was seen as a vital part of the cultures and commodities that produced it. Today, however, our experience with industrial farming dominates, with food now simply seen as a commodity...<sup>13</sup>

To somehow reconnect the those two parts – the people and the food - could potentially begin to remake a broken system by allowing people to understand the full ecological circle of growth, the repercussions of their actions, the work that goes into producing a head of lettuce, and the fruits of collective action.

### ***Why Community Gardens?***

One form of food-justice activism which responds to potentially all of these problems is community gardening or urban agriculture. These gardens take many forms: nonprofit, for-profit, guerilla gardening on vacant lots, school gardens, prison gardens, educational gardens, individual plots on public land, and the list continues. As with other social and environmental projects, these gardens can inspire an almost religious devotion and inspiration. A small plot of land in an urban area can be heavily laden with meaning and sentiment for the people organizing or working that soil, much more than is immediately apparent. Jeffrey Hou, author of a book on community gardening in Seattle explains: “A challenge of describing community gardens is that they are simultaneously a simple concept – a place devoted to gardening – and a complicated

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<sup>13</sup> Sumner, Jennifer, et al. “Putting the culture back into agriculture: civic engagement, community and the celebration of local food.” *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 8: 1 and 2. 2010.

social process shaped by participant dynamics, environment, political context and more.”<sup>14</sup> This dynamism of participation is an essential part of what attracts people to this work and makes them such a growing phenomenon in cities. It is also what makes them a subject of interest among activists: they potentially have the capacity to address a myriad of social-ecological issues literally and theoretically through agriculture, which itself is a social-ecological process by its very nature.<sup>15</sup>

An equally important aspect is connecting people to one another through the medium of gardening, and so theories and discussions about community gardens being capable of bringing about many different forms of social change abound. The general idea is that collaborative work towards a common goal unites communities and diverse groups, and that urban gardens are an effective medium for this collaborative work. Slocum’s study found that in some of the gardens she investigated, “the aim of coming together across difference is the goal whereas food is the means.”<sup>16</sup> Of course, this could be expressed in a myriad of different ways. Following is a brief review of professed benefits of community gardening in literature on the topic.

Community gardens have had a long history in the United States, each time with intent to produce food, yet almost always with a larger goal in mind. According to Laura Lawson, the first urban gardening movement was in response to the Panic of 1893, a severe economic depression. This was followed by the children’s school-garden movement in the early 20th century, which had aims of character reform in young people, while at the same time, the “garden-city” movement introduced the idea of self-reliant, leafy cities which would incorporate local food

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<sup>14</sup> Hou, Jeffrey, et al. *Greening Cities, Growing Communities: Learning from Seattle’s Urban Community Gardens*. Landscape Architecture Foundation and University of Washington Press: Washington, D.C. 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Sumner.

<sup>16</sup> Slocum, Rachel.

production into their economies.<sup>17</sup> World Wars I and II brought about “liberty gardens” and “relief gardens” to increase reliance on domestic food production.<sup>18</sup> Then, from the 1970s on to the present, the current movement has generally been an urban social cause, a response to disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods, and an effort to rebuild disenfranchised communities and bring nature back into the city. So, while all of these projects have had the goal of producing food, they have placed a broader emphasis on the uplift or empowerment of the poor, instilling a respect for nature, or cultivating in participants a positive work ethic.<sup>19</sup> Through these historical social-agricultural projects the *agri* and the *cultura* start to reconnect.

This idea of community building, community empowerment or bridging differences is one of the key notions of contemporary community gardening. Currently the movement is very much rooted in social justice. As 1960s urban renewal projects displaced poor and minority communities near the urban core, or disinvested in these communities, community gardening began to be considered “a source of collective empowerment and [a] much-needed venue for building social capital and community organization” as well as a source of food security in these growing food deserts.<sup>20</sup> Pudup argues that neoliberalism has dislocated the poor by allowing them to suffer disproportionately from the free market’s effects and left them high and dry through a calculated roll-back of social services, which has simultaneously encouraged values of self-improvement, or “D.I.Y.” attitudes towards social problems within non-profit social work. Grassroots and community-based gardens which allow for local, non-‘expert’ leadership have become increasingly popular as a form of social protest.<sup>21</sup> These projects not only provide food

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<sup>17</sup> Howard, Ebenezer. *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Swan Sonnenschein, 1902.

<sup>18</sup> Hou, Pudup and Lawson.

<sup>19</sup> Pudup, Mary Beth. “It takes a garden: cultivating citizen subjects in organized garden projects.” *Geoforum*: 39 (2008) 1228 – 1240.

<sup>20</sup> Pudup.

<sup>21</sup> Pudup.

assistance, but also allow community members to take back land, and shape a space in a way that is a reflection of that particular locale. As these gardens have sprouted up in vacant lots, the fights to keep them there have allowed neighborhoods to reclaim and redirect the status quo in their community, as well as make it a more beautiful place to live.

This can sound idealistic – “empowerment” is an abstract word - but these gardens have concrete methods of social-capital building. Lynne Westphal details how individual, community and organizational empowerment occur through multiple processes in these garden projects.<sup>22</sup> Individual empowerment can come from the feeling of personal responsibility that direct action brings about. Organizationally, these gardens can bring in more members of block clubs, or can provide a new forum for members of the community to work together on common issues garden-related or otherwise relevant to the neighbors. As gardens grow larger or more prominent, the members of an organization may strengthen ties to various agencies or local politicians. These ties are also empowering to the community as a whole, as they can potentially bring in more resources for other projects that the community might want to embark on.<sup>23</sup> As participants tend to create and shape the goals within community-based gardens, they can feel fully responsible for the results that occur. But along the way, the maintenance of the space and the collective work that goes into it builds community in its own right through dialogue, collaboration and sweat towards the common goals.<sup>24</sup> Through direct work in the garden and as a byproduct of the collective effort, these organizations empower and grow social capital and community networks in a very democratic way.

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<sup>22</sup> Westphal, Lynne M “Urban Greening and Social Benefits: a Study of Empowerment Outcomes.” Journal of Arboriculture 29(3): May 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Westphal.

<sup>24</sup> Hou.



These gardens have many positive environmental benefits as well. For example, the carbon footprint of food consumption is greatly reduced by local food production and acquisition when compared with that of conventional agriculture, where an apple might be shipped to California from New Zealand or Chile rather than harvested from an orchard within the city limits when apples are in season. Within these gardens, the nutrient cycle is more complete, especially if composting and seed-saving occurs; by reducing inputs to the farm, soil integrity is maintained or enhanced, energy is saved and waste is reduced. There is a valuable educational component, as well, whether directly through classes or indirectly from hands-on work, as participants learn about plant growth, ecology, seasonal food, all of which ideally contribute to leading more eco-conscious lives overall. As these gardens take place in urban areas, they can have many positive environmental effects associated with urban greening, such as creating animal, insect and human habitat in the ‘concrete jungle,’ reducing the urban ‘heat-island’ effect, sequestering carbon and by creating a potential for residents to live more active lifestyles, even if not actually working in the garden, but from having green spaces available to them.<sup>25</sup>

Urban greening, such as preservation of green space or creation of additional green space in itself is an important effect or goal of community gardens. Especially in dense urban neighborhoods, green spaces allow residents to breathe fresh air, exercise and spend time outdoors. However, these concrete effects of urban green space also provide further psychological or community benefits. Pudup argues that these gardens are “informal spaces that provide psychological relief from the surrounding built environment” and green spaces have been shown to relieve stress and aggression.<sup>26</sup> Further, green spaces provide the perception (which can lead to a reality) of greater neighborhood security. In a study cited by Westphal,

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<sup>25</sup> Hou; Slocum.

<sup>26</sup> Pudup; Westphal.

public housing projects which included green spaces tended to have fewer crimes and were safer overall. She cites: "...researchers found that greener public housing neighborhoods... tend to be safer, with fewer incivilities and reported crimes."<sup>27</sup>

Public health is aided by community gardens through provision of green spaces for exercise and work associated with farming for the garden participants, but also through improved access to fresh, organic produce. There are myriad ways in which these gardens distribute the food which is grown, *at least* for those actively working in the gardens. Fresh, good food is brought an area which may not have had much before. As we will see, produce can be distributed individually, plot-by-plot; through work-trade; taken to food banks; put in school kitchens or any other place that an organization can think of, but overall at least some people are eating better food than they may have been before a garden existed. While the specifics of garden organization can be directed many different ways, food security is always somehow addressed by the simple act of adding more good food into the city or neighborhood.

But perhaps what makes these contemporary gardens so popular is the proactive way in which they address social problems. Inequities produced by capitalism are tough problems to even think about fixing--where would you even start? And the small steps that a food-justice organization may take to produce a piece of policy to address these problems (for example, groups working to push the 2012 Farm Bill in a more equitable, ecological direction) may find slow, incremental encouragements, yet when faced with the immense amount of dollars and strength of agribusiness lobbyists, groups can be bogged down. Progress is slow. Yet community gardeners are working towards "being the change [they] want to see in the world" (as that famous Ghandi-inspired quote instructs). With each zucchini harvested in a community garden, that gardener becomes an activist by opting out of an illogical and harmful system of industrial

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<sup>27</sup> Westphal.

agriculture. Work needs to be done at the grassroots level and on larger policy levels in order to really make changes on these issues, but urban farmers are both taking baby steps towards a more equitable and ecologically-sustainable world while simultaneously building the base for a movement which can show law-makers that fair, fresh food is something that their constituents want and deserve.<sup>28</sup>

As Pudup argues, the history of community gardens that have emerged during economic crisis “suggests community gardening has been a response to pronounced and recurring cycles of capitalist restructuring and their tendency to displace people and places through investment processes governing industries and urban space.”<sup>29</sup> These gardens thus are places of resistance and reaction to urban disinvestment and structural injustices; they help their participants to disconnect from thoughtless consumption and step back a process that harms the planet and their communities. There is a positive psychological effect of being active in the garden; people can rest easier knowing that they are actively resisting some of the root causes of inequality and environmental degradation. Hou explains, “during war, economic depression or social unrest, people find satisfaction in becoming involved and seeing their effort transform bare earth into a productive garden. While the larger problem reaches beyond the control of individuals, an individual can make a difference in his or her own life and community by gardening.”<sup>30</sup> It is this sort of dialogue surrounding gardening that transforms it from a pleasant pastime into a political act.

There are other proactive methods of addressing food insecurity and food justice in cities, and these are often interlinked processes. For example, increasing the number of farmer’s markets in cities and expanding their availability in poorer neighborhoods is one method.

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<sup>28</sup> Gottlieb.

<sup>29</sup> Pudup.

<sup>30</sup> Hou.

Another step in the right direction is expanding use of Electronic Benefits Transfer, or what were formerly known as food stamps, to many farmers markets, and the number is increasing.<sup>31</sup> Grocery store cooperatives, local and healthy school lunch programs, cooking and job training programs all help to address food justice in urban contexts. However, community gardens, as the point of origin of food, are able provide a more holistic answer to questions of food justice (literally from *seed* to plate), provide the green space, educational components, and the simple tactile and psychological pleasure of knowing that the seed you planted is developing into something productive through your care. The proactiveness and inclusiveness of community garden work can be inspirational and exciting, but the many different ways in which the term “community garden” can be interpreted makes it important to examine *how* all of the ideas about the positive benefits of community gardening actually play out in the day-to-day work performed.

### ***Seattle’s Urban Agriculture Scene***

Although the food-justice and community gardening movement is nationwide, and has roots worldwide, I have chosen to focus my analysis on the community gardening movement in Seattle, Washington. Because of the variety of forms that these gardens can take, and especially because of the importance of localness which is essential to the movement, it will be more effective to compare participation and success of specific gardens within one city. I would like to say that this decision is based entirely academically on factors specific to the city, but to be truthful, this decision was made primarily because I am a Seattleite, born and raised. As I indicated in my opening vignette about my childhood memories, directly and indirectly these gardens have been a part of my life since I can remember. And while I am a very loyal Seattleite,

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<sup>31</sup> Hou; Gottlieb; Zezima, Katie. “Food Stamps, Now Paperless, are Getting Easier to Use at Farmers Markets.” New York Times. July 20, 2009.

I have also been away from the city and experienced other urban areas and farming perspectives, and am hopefully able to maintain a critical outlook towards the significance of my hometown's urban agricultural activism. I love Seattle and I think that many things are done quite well, but I still believe that improvements can be made. These are my biases.

Seattle, nicknamed the “Emerald City,” is ringed by mountain ranges--the Olympics to the West, and Cascades to the East. Rainier stands sentinel from the South and on a clear day Mt. Baker looms to the North. It is a city defined by its geography, closed in on two sides by water – both fresh and salt, with smaller lakes dividing up the city North to South. And when a Seattleite isn't navigating around bodies of water, they are probably working their way up a hill. To spend time in the city is to appreciate compromise with nature – if planners could not level one hill, they found some other way to develop it. Seattleites have learned to live their lives in an almost constant eight month rain shadow, and know that those four months of green, green paradise are *almost* worth it. Seattle accepts the confusion between culture and nature, and without worrying too much about it. Or at least this is the cultivated image of the Seattleite: a cosmopolitan nature lover; they can hardly help it because nature simply surrounds them. As Matthew Klinge, author of *Emerald City: an Environmental History of Seattle*, puts it, “As much as environmental fundamentalists of all stripes want to proclaim the virtues of unsullied nature, the world we live in is a messy fusion of the natural and cultural, and Seattle's boosters have capitalized on it relentlessly.”<sup>32</sup> He points out that this eco-conscientiousness apparently intrinsic to all Seattleites is just part of the carefully polished image. This may be the experience for some portion of Seattleites, but for many the city's history and policies have not been as kind, and enjoyment of

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<sup>32</sup> Klinge, Matthew. *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2007.

nature may not be as easy to come by, or as large a part of the experience of the city. Seattle, as any city, has had its fair share of historical injustices which still have not been righted today.

This is not to say, however, that people have not been fighting the good fight for a long time.<sup>33</sup> The methods of action and the goals to which it is directed have changed, but the contemporary city is a product of struggles by different groups to “match their aspirations for community with the challenges of making livable places over time.”<sup>34</sup> Seattle’s community garden history and current movement are another facet of this continuing struggle for equity and a good life – an ongoing attempt to right the wrongs, and to find a more equitable form of that precarious nature/culture balance that the city has walked for so long. These gardens can be seen as an attempt by some to reconcile the “two Seattles” – that of the ‘emerald city’ and the reality of city life for the poor and minority residents who do not fit into the carefully constructed image of hip ‘greenness’: trying to bring the goods of the city to those who have been disenfranchised by the image. But how can this occur – the sharing of the sustainable, ‘green’ aspects and attitudes that go along with community gardening without trying to homogenize the city, or instill a cultural hierarchy of lifestyles and ideas? Perhaps *this* is the line to be walking with these garden projects.

Seattle’s ecologically-conscious image is not just rhetorical: in many ways Seattle *has* been a leader in environmental policy and sustainable lifestyles and business practices. The city has one of the largest recycling programs in the country, has had curbside composting for three years, people have long been riding bikes to work (Seattle is consistently rated in the top rated

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<sup>33</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey Craig. *Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 2010. Print.

<sup>34</sup> Klinge.

cities for bike commuting in the U.S.<sup>35</sup>), and is home to major outdoor lifestyle companies such as REI and Eddie Bauer.<sup>36</sup> There are miles of USFS designated wilderness trails an hour outside the city and the closest trails are swamped with hikers on summer weekends. Seattle led U.S. cities in following the Kyoto protocol to limit carbon emissions that President George W. Bush had rejected in 2005.<sup>37</sup> In 2009, the internationally heralded environmentalist mayor Greg Nickels who began that initiative was replaced by Mike McGinn, a former Sierra Club chapter head.<sup>38</sup> To vote such a strong activist candidate into the mayor's office is indicative of the environmental priorities of the city.

These sorts of policies and representations of activism towards environmental and urban sustainability are only one method of addressing these sorts of issues; they are a more local version of the top-down policy changes discussed earlier. But Seattle also has a long history of grassroots, countercultural activism which has had a heavy influence on the city's community-gardening organizations. Food justice has been a hot topic in Seattle since the 1960s, as a representation of DIY activism: grassroots-based activists formed the first generation of the community gardens organizations which still exist today.

An essential idea to the movement which evolved during these early days is the importance of being *local*. Beyond just local food, localness in activism is also an essential tenant of urban social change. This idea came about prominently during the 1970s, as the

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<sup>35</sup> League of American Bicyclists, "201 American Community Survey Top 70 Cities Data." <<https://public.sheet.zoho.com/public/bikeleague/2000-to-2010-bike-commuters-largest-70-2-1>> September 26, 2011

<sup>36</sup> As a side note, REI was actually formed cooperatively – as a member-owned outdoor clothing company. This model of a consumer cooperative is an example of Seattle's history of countercultural and idealistic business practices. Although the company has grown, it remains committed to member-ownership. Welch, Craig. "Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels' Green Agenda Wasn't Enough." *The Seattle Times*. 16 Jan. 2010. Web. <[http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/pacificnw/2010724154\\_pacificpgonickels17.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/pacificnw/2010724154_pacificpgonickels17.html)>.

<sup>37</sup> Sanders, Eli. "Seattle Leads U.S Cities Joining Kyoto Protocol." *The New York Times*. 16 May 2005. Web. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/15/world/americas/15iht-global.html>>.

<sup>38</sup> Welch.

neighborhood and home became central to reframing what urban life could be. Sanders writes, “...despite the popular narrative of hippie dropouts and communes in the 1960s, many activists remained and labored hard to remake the city and neighborhoods. No matter how radical, they still embraced home’s nourishing associations in their efforts to dwell more benignly in the city.”<sup>39</sup> And as social welfare programming decreased during the 1970s and 1980s as part of neoliberal policies, activism had to be taken into communities’ own hands.<sup>40</sup> Seattle’s countercultural activists sought to picture a city which holistically included urban neighborhoods within a larger, regional ecological system.<sup>41</sup>

These socio-ecological ideas formed the backbone of Seattle’s alternative food community movement, which has only grown and expanded to this day. Most famously, the organization “Tilth,” or “Seattle Tilth” as it is known today, represents the history of these sentiments. Tilth was founded in 1974 by a group of environmental activists who met at a countercultural environmental conference taking place alongside the 1974 Spokane, WA, Expo. Wendell Berry was a keynote speaker whose words ignited the audience and Mark Musick in particular, who organized fellow activists who together established a philosophy on bioregionalism and, on Berry’s encouragement, connecting urban environmentalists with farming and farming with culture.<sup>42</sup> Most telling, however, of the goals of the organization is the background of members: Musick was a former Chicago community organizer, and many of the other original founders were 1960s social-justice activists. So although from the start, Tilth had its roots in farming, farming was a medium through which activists worked on issues of ecology and society. Today, Tilth is a private, non-profit umbrella organization that houses many

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<sup>39</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C.

<sup>40</sup> Sanders; Pudup.

<sup>41</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C.

<sup>42</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C.



different garden programs – teaching gardens, youth gardens, and provides resources for many other programs.

By the time Tilth was organizing in Central Washington, Seattle already had ten publicly owned P-Patches. P-Patches are public spaces with individual plots available for rent at a nominal fee per year. The first P-Patch was established in 1970 and the program has grown ever since.<sup>43</sup> Today, Seattle has more than 70 P-Patches and a long waiting list of individuals who hope to rent a plot. As compared to Tilth, P-Patches are public, yet the two programs work closely together and Tilth often houses programs in P-Patch sites. This city’s support is what makes Seattle such a welcoming environment for the community garden movement: while in most cities, gardeners have to “guerilla garden” on vacant lots, community gardens have been included in neighborhood planning in Seattle as a legitimate green space for the last forty years.<sup>44</sup> Yet these two organizations are simply the precursors to what has today flourished into a large, diverse movement. Although the many organizations frequently collaborate on projects and are by no means separate, in the last few years, a surge in creation of new garden projects has occurred as a result of increased national interest in food issues, as well as the 2010 “Year of Urban Agriculture” program run by the city of Seattle. This program expanded zoning codes to allow for more profitability for urban farms and expanded support for community and backyard gardeners.<sup>45</sup> It seems as though weekly I hear about a new gardening organization that has its own specific goals or methods – from fruit tree harvest clubs, giving gardens, school gardens, gardens which only use bike transportation, etc. These gardens continue to be attractive methods

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<sup>43</sup> “P-Patch Community Gardens.” <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/aboutPpatch.htm>. September 26, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Hou.

<sup>45</sup> Falk, Tyler. “Seattle’s New Urban-Ag Models are Sprouting in Friendly Soil.” *Grist*. 17 Aug 2010. Web. 13 Nov. 2011.

of activism for Seattleites, and the longevity of the urban gardening culture is a testament to its success.

The current upswing of interest in community gardening in Seattle is a return to the simpler DIY philosophies of the '60s and '70s. As Jeffrey Sanders asserts in his book on urban sustainability in Seattle, activists are “facing the shared contradictions of a postwar environmental politics that by the end of the millennium had forgotten it’s scrappier origins...”<sup>46</sup> This current wave of activism is a step back from green planning and fancy LEED building of the 1990s and 2000s, which, while important as features of urban sustainability overall, have forgotten the “big picture” goals of activism intrinsic to earlier decades of “popular environmentalism, which derived strength from the urban social, political and cultural contests in the era of postwar metropolitanization.”<sup>47</sup> The current resurgence of interest in community gardening is a continuation of the fight against these same issues, and the success of this movement in Seattle today is likely due to these multiple factors: the long history of Seattle in the urban farming scene, government support which sustains and encourages projects, the resources from more established programs such as Tilth which can serve as models for these smaller organizations, and the sympathy of an environmentally and socially conscious body politic.

### ***Criticism of Community Gardens***

These ‘bioregional’ ideas and gardens all sound fairly ideal—utopian, even. So could they be a little too-good to be true, as most utopias are? This is the question that a few activists and researchers are beginning to raise: these are a lot of purported benefits for a simple concept.

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<sup>46</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C.

<sup>47</sup> Sanders.

Do these community gardens really have the myriad effects that organizers claim? There are a few key issues of contention in the literature.

First, Pudup differentiates the modern organized garden project from the traditional community gardens of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As she points out,

...the agents of [modern garden programs]... are less neighborhoods rising up to reclaim their communities and resist their marginalization and rather more a variety of non-state and quasi-state actors who deliberately organize gardens to achieve a desired transformation...<sup>48</sup>

She rightly acknowledges that these garden projects are not the same as those of yore, where residents were reclaiming space and working for their own betterment, but often these are now projects with outside organizations coming in to potentially do this *for* a community. While these are still good intentions, and these projects can still be quite successful, they must be differentiated from more organically arising community gardens. But as these garden projects do not necessarily arise from the direct will and effort of the community thus empowering community members to lead, do the principles of community empowerment still apply in these situations, when the leadership and organization are not in the hand of locals? Further, the term “community garden” implies certain goals and benefits, and the many different ways in which this can be expressed by various organizations can potentially be misleading or effectually *disempowering*.<sup>49</sup> There are many competing meanings and values attributed to these spaces, and each can create different effects in terms of who is benefitting and in what ways. These complications, as well as ambiguity and different interpretations of the term “community development,” make it difficult to assess when the ‘development’ and ‘empowerment’ as a result from the garden project are occurring.

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<sup>48</sup> Pudup.

<sup>49</sup> Pudup; Lawson, Laura, and Janni Sorenson. "When Overwhelming Needs Meet Underwhelming Prospects." *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. Ed. Jeffrey Hou. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Further muddying the clean “community garden” term are questions of involvement: Who is involved? If the garden is comprised of people hailing from the surrounding blocks, it may be more representative of that community than if organizers form an outside project manage or design the project. But, then, what is the definition of ‘local’ or ‘surrounding community’ to be used: is a local garden defined by the city limits, by neighborhood boundaries, or by an individual block? Does the “community” that organizes or benefits from the garden necessarily have to be geographic? What about religious or educational community? Or, in the case of newer organizations arising, such as Alleycat Acres, what about online community? And what is the nature of participation – is it voluntary? How is outreach performed to attract more diverse communities? Each of these questions likely has bearing on the nature of empowerment, the place of a community garden within its host neighborhood, and the changing meanings of community gardening within urban areas.

The very structure of third-party organizations which do not have origins in the neighborhood in which the garden or organization works can potentially reinforce the disenfranchising attitudes and actions towards disenfranchised groups which the organization is trying to work against. Rachel Slocum also presents compelling arguments for the necessity of awareness of anti-racist practice and the potential for cultural imperialism in these garden projects if organizers are not proactively working against culturally hegemonic attitudes.<sup>50</sup> Slocum details that in New York and Massachusetts, “Of the 13 organizations with a staff of 10-15, the leadership positions are 84% white to 16% people of color and their board members are 11% people of color and 89% white.”<sup>51</sup> Although there is not similar data about Seattle organizations, there *does* exist at least a stereotype that the community garden organizations are part of a largely white, middle-class

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<sup>50</sup> Westphal; Slocum.

<sup>51</sup> Slocum

movement. As these organizations frequently work within low-income and minority neighborhoods, this dynamic can be problematic, and it can be difficult to fully address these issues power and privilege implicit in this work. Yet ignorance can hinder work that the projects do, as ‘bridging differences’ and empowering underrepresented communities are often stated goals. Lack of representation of locals can lead to the sentiment that “those who experience food insecurity tend to be on the table rather than at it – the objects of the work, but not the leaders of it.”<sup>52</sup> This does not end up being very empowering at all.

Yet is it fair to assume active social consciousness and work towards inclusivity and developing local leadership from these community gardens and organizations even if it is not an explicitly stated goal? It seems as though issues of racism and classism are so engrained in food justice work that they cannot be extracted from the dialogue if the organizations are to enact real change, especially because of the professed social dimensions of community gardens and the very local nature of the philosophies surrounding them. Logically, it would seem that these organizations must address and be accountable to the specific needs of the local communities and fostering leadership from community members. But are they, and again, *is* this necessary? What if it *is* just about the food?

### ***Guiding Questions***

With the burgeoning number of food-justice organizations in cities across the U.S., how do we know what works and what does not? This project is an attempt to demystify and classify the successes and failures of diverse organizations in one microcosm of the food justice movement: a few community garden organizations in Seattle. I will attempt to apply these many broader theories of gardening to these specific case studies by examining the organizational histories, mission statements, and volunteer policies of these organizations, supplementing this information

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<sup>52</sup> Slocum.

with local news articles, interviews and newsletters. Through this analysis, this thesis begins to answer larger questions about access and inclusion of local communities and diverse groups of people within these organizations and the larger food justice movement in Seattle. How well does the rhetoric of community participation really play out, both in the day-to-day work of the organization and in the original creation of the garden? What does “community” and “local” mean in the changing landscape of activism? What can Seattle’s past and present teach us about how best to move forward with the current food justice movement in the United States?



## Chapter One: The P-Patch Program

Picardo, Marra, Desimone: these are historic last names which connect modern Seattleites to the city's immigrant roots. All three are names of families who at one point owned large swaths of land in areas of Seattle which have now become quite urbanized and largely developed. Yet when the land was in the care of these families, it produced local, organic food for the city before "local and organic" meant anything special. The original Giuseppe "Joe" Desimone was an Italian farmer who cultivated crops on acres of the rich farmland in South Seattle along the Duwamish River. He sold these at the Pike Place Market, acquiring more stalls and buying more stock until he became the owner, until 1946.<sup>53</sup> Rainie Picardo was the owner of the last remaining truck farm land in North Seattle, in what is now, and in the 1960s already, a dense residential neighborhood. However, this once was an area that was covered in small family-owned farms, which also provided Seattle with food, and likely the Pike Place Market as well.<sup>54</sup> Carmine and Maria Marra purchased a piece of land in what is now South Park, Seattle, from Joe Desimone in 1920 and farmed this land until selling it to the King County in 1970. These historic names, the land and its traditional use has been preserved through Seattle's P-Patch program. In fact the "P" in P-Patch stands for Picardo – as the Picardo family's land has been preserved as a productive garden in form of the first city-owned P-Patch, since 1973 when the program started. Marra-Desimone farm is now also a very productive piece of land and a demonstration urban farm in its original location. Since the original Picardo P-Patch was supported by the city as part of the new P-Patch Gardening program in the 1970s, the program

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<sup>53</sup> "Pike Place Market - Market History." *Pike Place Market - Home*. 2010. Web. 04 Dec. 2011. <[http://www.pikeplacemarket.org/visitor\\_info/market\\_history](http://www.pikeplacemarket.org/visitor_info/market_history)>.

<sup>54</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey. "Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia." University of Pittsburgh Press; 2010.



has increased to more than 70 gardens and 23 acres of garden space citywide.<sup>55</sup> As gardens are added and fought for by modern community activists and farmers, these neighborhoods, people and spaces are commemorated in the names and presence of the new gardens across the city. Each may be city-owned and operated and serve the same very basic function, but each is quite unique in history and particularities to the space. I think these old Seattle farmers would be proud of their legacy as Seattle reconnects itself with its agricultural history through the form of community gardens.

The Seattle P-Patch program came about in the midst of a flurry of interest in alternative consumption and neighborhood activism. PCC, or the Puget Consumer Co-op, had begun years ago, in the 1950s, as a group of concerned neighbors who sought to address “healthful and sensible consumption” by purchasing healthy alternative staples such as carob and wheat germ and distributing them locally, to members.<sup>56</sup> This organization had only grown in the intervening years, and now neighborhood organizations were gaining power, such as the Model Cities neighborhood-initiated uplift program (which included an Environmental Health Program as part of the project) which was taking place in Central Seattle and the International District. These highly organized groups of community members supported by city government were making great strides in neighborhood empowerment and addressing “urban blight” quite effectively.<sup>57</sup> So, by 1974, the concept of community groups coming together to address social or environmental issues was becoming commonplace. When Darlyn Rundburg, a UW student and PCC member, was given the remnants of the Picardo’s farm to use, this idea was not foreign to her. As the city began to raise taxes on the land and it became less and less affordable to keep,

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<sup>55</sup> Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, “P-Patch Community Gardening Program: Community Update.” Spring 2011. Pamphlet.

<sup>56</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C. p152.

<sup>57</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C. pp 91.

Rundburg proposed to the city council that they preserve the land as farmland, with the idea of subdividing it into personal plots for public use. Luckily, the city council approved the plan. Rundburg and PCC managed the land and by 1974, the city council formally included this park and the expansion of the P-Patch program under the Parks Department and Department of Human Resources as a result of the original P-Patches early successes.<sup>58</sup> By the end of the year, the program had already expanded to ten P-Patches.<sup>59</sup>

Thirty-seven years later, interest and acreage in the P-Patch program has grown hugely. There are now many partners and staff involved in the organization and over 4,400 gardeners working in publicly-owned soil.<sup>60</sup> As Seattle's needs and program emphases have changed, the P-Patches have evolved, yet as garden coordinator Kenya Freddie says, "The core is still the core... food security and social justice issues have spiked, due to the economic downturn, but the core of the program has remained the same."<sup>61</sup> And what is the core of that program? The P-Patch Trust, the P-Patch Programs' main non-profit partner's mission is to

...acquire, build, preserve and protect community gardens in Seattle's neighborhoods. Through advocacy, leadership and partnerships, the Trust expands access to community gardening across economic, racial, ethnic, ability and gender lines; promotes organic gardening and builds community through gardening. We seek to break urban isolation by providing opportunities for people to garden together, learn from each other, develop a sense of neighborhood and create a more livable urban environment.<sup>62</sup>

We can see from the expansion, longevity and use of these gardens that the program has been successful. But what of the success of the goals outlined in the mission statement, of expanding access and breaking urban isolation? In this chapter I will analyze local community participation

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<sup>58</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C. p154.

<sup>59</sup> Hucka, Judy.

<sup>60</sup> Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, "P-Patch Community Gardening Program: Community Update." Spring 2011. Pamphlet.

<sup>61</sup> Freddie, Kenya. P-Patch Garden Coordinator. Personal interview August 16, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> P-Patch Trust. "Mission/Vision." <<http://www.ppatchtrust.org/about/>>. October 19, 2011.

in this program, whether the P-Patch program empowers gardeners and the community at large, and if this program is sustainable in the long-term. Through analysis of its work in just a few of the many existing gardens, I find that the P-Patch program has developed a very effective way of sustaining volunteerism, addressing the needs of each community, and fostering leadership through the program's unique support from the city government, flexibility to adapt to diverse neighborhoods, and deliberate processes of inclusivity.

### ***City Government Support***

Seattle's city-sponsored gardening program is quite unique. At the time it was created, this was the first public community gardening organization in the nation. As the first city P-Patch coordinator noted, this was the first time that a city had acted to preserve agricultural land in an urban area for that purpose. "This could be a major precedent" they predicted, and that has turned out to be true.<sup>63</sup> Many major cities in the United States now have public community gardening programs, but Seattle still remains the second largest, after New York City.<sup>64</sup> This step, of providing city funds for the gardens allows for many positive benefits, such as increasing volunteerism and community investment because of the permanence of the spaces, providing reliable funding and institutional support, and potentially preventing the problematic aspects associated with nonprofit community development work.

As detailed in the introduction, Seattle as a city has a culture which is overall very supportive of environmental work. The city government is no exception, and in both words and actions has been a boon to the community gardening movement. This tradition can be seen historically in the preservation of the Pike Place Market as the top tourist destination in the city, as it honors the history of local farming and fresh, northwest food, and also in the formation of

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<sup>63</sup> Sanders, Jeffrey C. p155.

<sup>64</sup> Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, "P-Patch Community Gardening Program: Community Update." Spring 2011. Pamphlet.

the original P-Patch. During the economic depression of the early 1970s, it is surprising that a city government would be willing to preserve land for what could seem like an economically unproductive use rather than developing it, especially in dense North Seattle. Today, the garden program enjoys strong public and government support. In 1992, community gardens were added to the city's comprehensive plan – to have one for each 2,500 households, which officially legitimized community gardens as a valid expression of public space.<sup>65</sup> Financially, a \$146 million Parks and Green Spaces Levy was passed in 2008 by a 58% vote, which will allow the P-Patch program to build four new gardens. This, combined with funds from other grants is allowing the P-Patch program to create fifteen new gardens by 2013, which mirrors the situation which Seattle found itself in during the 1970s, of rapid expansion of the program.<sup>66</sup> For better or for worse, despite the overall heavy cuts to the 2011 city budget, the P-Patch program has more funds to work with for 2012.<sup>67</sup>

The city support is also evident in symbolic gestures. For example, in the Summer 2011 *P-Patch Post*, a quarterly publication of the P-Patch Trust, there is an article detailing the installation of a terrace garden in the Mayor's office downtown. Mayor Mike McGinn says of the garden: "We are proud to help local food banks by growing healthy food on our office terrace... This wouldn't be possible without the wonderful volunteers dedicated to getting food to those who need it."<sup>68</sup> Actions like these, symbolic or otherwise, show garden participants that their hard work is worthwhile – these gardens and the hours of labor dedicated to them are not going anywhere soon. Only nine of the existing 70+ gardens are leased from private owners, and although many of the others are leased from other City of Seattle Departments, they are often in

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<sup>65</sup> Shukoske, Jane E. "Community Development through Urban Gardening: State and Local Policies Transforming Urban Open Space." *Legislation and Public Policy* 3.351 (1999): 352-92.

<sup>66</sup> Seattle Parks and Recreation. "Parks and Green Spaces Levy." Pamphlet. 2011.

<sup>67</sup> "2012 Proposed Budget." City of Seattle, September 26, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Shulte, Ray. "Volunteers and donors help create Mayor's terrace garden." *P-Patch Post*. Summer 2011.

underused or marginal spaces such as beneath power lines or over former landfills that would have little other use for the city.<sup>69</sup> Thistle P-Patch, for example, is on leased land from Seattle City Light, but has used that land for 37 years.<sup>70</sup> While a lease is still not permanent, which is the ideal, this is still a far better situation than many ‘guerilla gardens’ or other gardens which have only temporary use of space. The publicly-owned spaces loaned to the P-Patch program also operate on a 5-year lease system, so gardeners know how much time they have before the discussion of renewal comes up.<sup>71</sup> Kenya Freddie explained the benefits of a city-run program: “These programs are more sustainable because of the municipal funding. The land is locked down. Unlike Alleycat Acres [more on this organization in Chapter 3], for example, people are helping them out, but if they lose their land they have to go somewhere else.”<sup>72</sup> This issue of impermanence plagues community gardens, but a city-sponsored program takes steps to remedy this issue by providing the financial support and a continuing effort to purchase the land.

The P-Patch program’s organization and policies could also contribute to sustainability of volunteerism. Gardeners may be willing to continue to invest time and energy in the garden because the city ownership means that their energy will be somewhat more permanent, but the design of the program also likely contributes to the long-lasting success of the program. The P-Patch program allows for individual benefits – not just in abstract ideas such as empowerment, as Westphal explains,<sup>73</sup> but in much more concrete ways. In these P-Patch gardens, the basic structure is individual or family plots, which are available for a small fee per year to garden

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<sup>69</sup> Department of Neighborhoods. “P-Patch Community Garden Program Fact Sheet 2010.”

<<http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/documents/FactSheet2010.pdf>> October 20, 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Hou, Jeffrey. *Greening Cities, Growing Communities*. Landscape Architecture Foundation, Washington D.C. 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Shukoske, Jane E. "Community Development through Urban Gardening: State and Local Policies Transforming Urban Open Space." *Legislation and Public Policy* 3.351 (1999): 352-92.

<sup>72</sup> Freddie, Kenya. Interview.

<sup>73</sup> Westphal, Lynne M. “Urban Greening and Social Benefits: A Study of Empowerment Outcomes.” *Journal of Arboriculture* 29 (3): May 2003.

however the plot users see fit. In this structure, the gardeners typically have ownership over their small plot, and their labor directly benefits them – they get to keep all of the produce. There are alternatives to this typical structure, which will be discussed later, but in providing a direct incentive to community garden work, the P-Patch likely attracts more volunteers and engages a broader group of users and in a more sustained way than if it was a food bank garden. This is not to say that this is the only benefit of these types of programs, and P-Patch garden coordinator Kenya Freddie was sure to point this out when I asked her if these individual benefits are the reason people keep coming back.<sup>74</sup> These social and community benefits are more abstract, but the P-Patch program also makes a deliberate effort to count for these intangible benefits such as empowerment and leadership.

### **Deliberate Inclusivity**

Perhaps the P-Patch program's strongest asset is its deliberate effort to be flexible and inclusive. While there is the base model for a P-Patch -- a group of individual plots -- over the years, the P-Patch program has expanded to have alternatives to this model to better fit the needs of the community in which it is located, or to better include an underrepresented group. When I asked Kenya Freddie about how the P-Patch program has evolved since 1973, she cited the program's expanding efforts to promote diversity. She says that the functioning of the program has had to be assessed and altered as demand and demographics have shifted. Race and social justice have become more primary considerations and more efforts are being made to ensure that all residents have equal footing to get a P-Patch. As times have changed, they've had to "alter and enforce rules differently and make priority lists to be 'racially justified' and give everyone equal footing. The priority lists are ensuring that neighborhood demographics are more

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<sup>74</sup> Freddie, Kenya. Interview.

accurately represented within a P-Patch - even going to far as sometimes having to present the demographic data to residents to be more inclusive.”<sup>75</sup>

Besides taking an almost ‘affirmative action’ approach to make sure that these gardens are an accurate representation of the neighborhoods, the programming itself has expanded quite a bit. While most of the gardens have come about through community-driven lobbying, in 1993, the P-Patch Program and Trust started ‘Cultivating Community,’ a program that seeks to “equalize access to community gardening” by bringing gardens into under-served neighborhoods.<sup>76</sup> Essentially, the program gives a leg-up in starting gardens in these neighborhoods by expediting the organization process and taking more responsibility for gathering resources and creating the space. “Often barriers like income, language or life circumstances hinder a community's ability to start gardens, but the benefits of community gardening, including food security and neighborhood improvement, should be equally available.”<sup>77</sup> By 2003, there were twenty gardens started under Cultivating Community, twelve of which are connected with five different Seattle Housing Authority mixed-income and low income communities in South Seattle.<sup>78</sup> Once these gardens are established with extra P-Patch Program initiative, they are managed like any of the other gardens. When asked, Freddie explained that although the P-Patch Program kick-starts these gardens, there is always a desire in the community for a space such as this, and, regardless, that they are well-used once put in place.

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<sup>75</sup> Freddie, Kenya.

<sup>76</sup> Macdonald, Rich. “Program Thrives in Third Decade, but Challenges Loom.” P-Patch Community Gardens. 23 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/aboutPpatch.htm>>.

<sup>77</sup> MacDonald, Rich.

<sup>78</sup> “Market Gardens.” *P-Patch Community Gardens*. Web. 23 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/marketgardens/>>.

## *Flexibility*

An essential building block for success is the flexibility of programming to address needs specific to each neighborhood. The P-Patch Program now has three “Market Gardens” – P-Patches located next to housing developments (including some of the Cultivating Communities gardens) or in low-income areas in which participants can cultivate food to sell through CSA or at farmers markets.<sup>79</sup> Although in most P-Patches food may not be grown for sale, these market gardens allow families to supplement their incomes as well as receive the numerous other individual and community benefits associated with community gardening. Food grown on these farms are also sold for reduced cost to senior centers and at farm stands located near the gardens, to allow residents of the neighborhoods to purchase fresh, organic produce at a reasonable price. The farmers of these market gardens are a very diverse group – in 2010, the sixteen market gardeners spoke eight different languages.<sup>80</sup> This program in particular seems to exemplify the many goals laid about the potential of community gardening by connecting all of the dots – providing job opportunities, fresh local cheap produce to food insecure areas, fostering community growth, and reclaiming marginal land.

This flexibility to community-specific needs is also shown in the organization and daily processes of each individual garden. Perhaps it’s just the nature of a garden – organic and adaptable, but although government-run, these P-Patches seem to resist stereotypical bureaucratic problems of being overly regulatory, or slow to make changes. The P-Patches have numerous partners, and many gardens have different systems of leadership. The standard system of garden governance is to have one volunteer site coordinator who works as a go-between from the garden to the P-Patch Program and the P-Patch Trust, but this is not required. For example,

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<sup>79</sup> “P-Patch Community Gardening Program 2011 Fact Sheet.” Seattle Dept of Neighborhoods. Pamphlet.

<sup>80</sup> “P-Patch Community Gardening Program 2011 Fact Sheet.”



Interbay P-Patch and Bradner Gardens, two large and multi-use gardens have leadership teams (Interbay's is fifteen members strong), with specific people managing different aspects of the space and with representatives from the different organizations associated with the garden.<sup>81</sup> This allows for more opportunities for leadership within the garden as well as more access to support and advocacy for participants. Each manager has more time and energy to dedicate to the job, which allows more of a focus on less crucial aspects of the garden such as social events, teaching classes and other community building projects.

In smaller ways, too, gardens vary greatly in structure. The P-Patches have a wide range of sizes, since they are built on vacant pieces of land, and uses of the land differ as well. Thistle P-Patch is the largest at a whopping 3+ acres, while the smallest is the tiny Pelican Tea Garden, tucked in an alleyway in a dense area of the city.<sup>82</sup> Users needs also dictate what sorts of activities take place in the gardens. Most P-Patches have a central gathering place, at least a tool shed for users to congregate around, both for storage and for building community and hosting events, but some have much more. Bradner Gardens, for example has had a full-service park developed around the existing P-Patch. It now includes the individual plots, a demonstration garden for gardening classes (hosted by Seattle Tilth), native plant trails, a bioswale, a basketball court and play structures for kids as well as a grass field. This is all tied together by local artwork – mosaics decorating the paths, scarecrows made from found objects and a public restroom that was won awards for its design!<sup>83</sup> I live two blocks from Bradner Gardens, and I can attest that these features are well-used and loved -- especially on weekday evenings, people stroll through with their dogs, gardeners dig in their plots and teenagers play basketball while little kids romp

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<sup>81</sup> Hou, Jeffrey. *Greening Cities, Growing Communities*. Landscape Architecture Foundation, Washington D.C. 2010.

<sup>82</sup> "P-Patch Community Garden Program Fact Sheet 2010." Seattle Dept of Neighborhoods. Pamphlet.

<sup>83</sup> Hou, Jeffrey.

on the carved-wood tractor. It's a lovely sight. Interbay P-Patch and Magnuson P-Patch have similar designs -- they are much more than just the gardening plots. At Bradner, this all-encompassing space came about through a community decision-making process – this is what the neighborhood felt would work best in this space in order to be all-inclusive. But this design is not what all communities want in their farms, and that is represented in successful gardens as well.

Thistle P-Patch, one of the oldest in the city, is located in Rainier Beach, a neighborhood far south in Seattle, which has very different demographics than the neighborhoods of Bradner Gardens and Interbay (Mt. Baker and Queen Anne, respectively). It is lower-income and is located in Seattle's most diverse zip code – many of its residents are refugees or new immigrants to the United States, and thus have different needs than in other locations. At Thistle, space is arranged for maximum production – pathways are narrow, there is no community gathering space, no designated areas for rest or relaxation. In planning meetings, when the P-Patch Program brought up where they wanted to locate the gathering area the gardeners rejected this plan. A volunteer recalls: “At first we were kind of going for a formal gathering entry kind of thing and that ended up totally squashed by the gardeners.”<sup>84</sup> Most of the gardeners at Thistle are Asian immigrants – Hmong, Laotian, Mien and Korean, among others, and this influences the use. Especially in the Mien and Hmong groups, the idea of community volunteerism is foreign, so a structure dedicated to this use does not make a lot of sense. Perhaps more importantly, for many of the gardeners at Thistle, food security is a real issue and the food grown on the plot is essential to their family's nutrition – they want to grow as much as possible.<sup>85</sup> While the gardeners at Bradner, Interbay, and other sites appreciate their produce, in general the food

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<sup>84</sup> Hou, Jeffrey.

<sup>85</sup> Hou, Jeffrey.

grown at P-Patches like Thistle is more vital to daily sustenance to the gardeners, and luckily the P-Patch Program is flexible about its usual garden requirements to account for this.

### *Providing support for self-direction*

To “build community” can mean a host of different things. This phrase is tossed around in the mission statements and literature of many nonprofit organizations, but the how-to of the process is unclear and is something which needs to be adapted to particular circumstances. The P-Patch Program and Trust recognizes this challenge, and tellingly, the phrases “build community” or “grow community” are conspicuously absent from either of their mission statements. This is not to say, however, that this is not a central focus of the program. Kenya Freddie says of this issue:

The work towards strengthening communities and neighborhoods happens in small bits and bytes. This happens on a level from P-Patch to P-Patch, working outwards to neighborhoods and the larger Seattle community. But we are still trying to answer the question of “community” – what does it mean? How do you do it?<sup>86</sup>

The significance of the P-Patch Program's location within the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods rather than the Parks Department, for example shows that community and creating a sense of neighborhood are in fact primary goals of the program. Yet perhaps the better way to describe what the P-Patch program does is to provide support for self-direction and to build social capital and a belonging amongst disparate and diverse groups.

### *Diversity*

First, the P-Patch Program allows for access by diverse groups through simple measures of diversity awareness and training. Through being flexible, the programs provide a fit for many needs, but before this step, the program allows access to the program by anyone by providing information in many languages and having multilingual and multicultural staff members. For example, in the Spring 2011 “Community Update” Pamphlet published by the P-Patch Program,

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<sup>86</sup> Freddie, Kenya.

the news blurbs and instructions on how to get involved are reprinted in the pamphlet in ten different languages – English, Lao, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese, Somali, Amharic, Khmer and Chinese.<sup>87</sup> Beyond just making it easier for those who don't speak English or prefer a different language, this is a wonderful symbolic gesture that gardeners of different ethnicities are not only tolerated but invited to participate.

At relevant gardens, such as the Market Gardens and those like Thistle, which tend to have a higher number of non-English speakers, site coordinators are usually multilingual and trained in cross-cultural communication.<sup>88</sup> This allows for conflict mediation between gardeners in a way that is understandable to all, and is, again, a gesture that their needs will be met and provided for by the program.

#### *Fostering leadership and belonging*

The P-Patch Program has shifted its focuses and capabilities through the years. Currently, with the extra funding coming from the Parks and Green Spaces Levy, the program is able to open gardens throughout the city, and it uses analysis of neighborhoods in most need of a garden (judged by having at least one garden for each 2,500 households) to locate the new additions.<sup>89</sup> However, in the past, neighborhoods have had to propose and organize the garden themselves. Once the interest and location is established, the P-Patch Program works with the neighborhood to maintain the space and provide the support needed. In the Summer 2011 issue of *The P-Patch Post*, a publication of the P-Patch Trust, they included articles and profiles about participants at newer and older gardens, with special emphasis on the evolution of the spaces. Underneath a photo of an older man with his vegetables, the caption describes, “Sebastian and his wife have

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<sup>87</sup> “P-Patch Community Gardening Program Community Update.” Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. Spring 2011. Pamphlet.

<sup>88</sup> Hou, Jeffrey.

<sup>89</sup> Freddie, Kenya.

been gardening in the Angel Morgan P-Patch since it started – they helped build it with their neighbors.”<sup>90</sup> A few pages away, there is an article about the unveiling of the latest addition, Unpaving Paradise Garden, with the quote, “Unpaving Paradise’s own Saunatina Sanchez also had a chance to speak, telling those gathered about the community’s three-year effort to muster support and raise money to build the green space...”<sup>91</sup> These examples highlight the self-determination and independence that these gardens both require and foster. Both old-time and new activists are honored, as there is an understanding that this local involvement and pressure is largely the only way for these gardens to come about and continue, despite the support from the P-Patch Program.

Even in gardens which were not brought about by community lobbying, the P-Patch Program is structured such that leadership and collaboration is encouraged. It has a Youth Gardening program, where plots can be rented by school groups or programs for teaching, and classes and workshops are taught in the food bank garden portions of the P-Patches.<sup>92</sup> Programs such as these are fairly standard for leadership development, especially for youth, in cultivating an interest in environmental and community work, but these gardens have unofficial ways of developing leadership and social capital as well. For example, in Summer 2011, Seattle Tilth partnered with the P-Patch program to provide the first multilingual Master Composting class, translated in Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer, Mien and Lao. Besides developing gardening skills for the individual plot-owners, there were deliberate leadership goals associated with the program, “This is a fantastic opportunity to foster composting leadership among our richly

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<sup>90</sup> Epler, Melinda Briana. “P-Patch community gardens in spring.” *P-Patch Post*, Spring 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Power, Jen. “Welcome to Summit Slope Park and Unpaving Paradise.” *P-Patch Post*, Summer 2011.

<sup>92</sup> “P-Patch Youth Gardening.” *P-Patch Community Gardening*. Web. 24 Oct. 2011.

<<http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/youth.htm>>.

diverse South End Gardeners.”<sup>93</sup> Opportunities such as this not only allow gardeners to develop their skills, which they can then bring to friends in the garden, but also provide avenues for access to the P-Patch Program and Seattle Tilth which they may not have known about before. These sorts of outreach efforts allow gardeners to simultaneously more self-sufficient as well as aware and capable of using resources available in the city, which they can then, again, bring back with them to fellow gardeners.

The P-Patch program has also extended opportunities for official leadership specifically to members of ethnic communities served by the P-Patch Program who may not have representatives in leadership, or to groups who are not well represented in the P-Patch Program, in hopes that this will create opportunities for underserved groups. Involvement of more minority groups in the P-Patch Program is an explicit goal of the Program, especially with new Parks and Greenspaces Levy funding, and the program has proactively sought out community organizations to partner with to make this goal a reality.<sup>94</sup> An article published in a newspaper for Somali Seattleites discusses P-Patches desire for more East African P-Patch gardeners in a new garden in New Holly – a housing development with a high population of East African immigrants. Kenya Freddie met with local organizers, who then took the lead in finding local leadership for this garden:

East African Community Services, which is located in the New Holly Campus, has taken the lead in organizing, facilitating, and supporting East African involvement in the New Holly P-Patch. “We feel that the P-Patch program is an excellent opportunity for our community”, stated Abdirizak Jama, Program Director for East African Community Services (EACS)... EACS is still looking

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<sup>93</sup> Yun, Bunly. "P-Patch Gardeners Graduate from First Multilingual Master Composter Class." *Front Porch*. Department of Neighborhoods, 27 Sept. 2011. Web. 24 Oct. 2011. <<http://frontporch.seattle.gov/2011/09/27/p-patch-gardeners-graduate-from-first-multilingual-master-composter-class/>>.

<sup>94</sup> "Urban Gardening for Seattle's East African Population." *Runta - the Truth*. 21 Sept. 2011. Web. 24 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.runtanews.com/2011/09/22/urban-gardening-for-seattles-east-african-population/>>.

Seattle Parks and Recreation. "Parks and Green Spaces Levy." Pamphlet. 2011.

for members of the New Holly East African community that would like to be volunteer community leaders.<sup>95</sup>

This active effort on the part of the P-Patch to transition gardens which were initiated with less direct neighborhood involvement begins to remedy any possible disconnect or disinterest that might ordinarily come along with an imposed garden. As shown in the above citation, the P-Patch Program is actively working to extend opportunities for leadership to neighborhood members rather than a P-Patch employee. This is a demonstration of effort on the part of the Program to foster community-based networks and empowerment of traditionally disenfranchised groups within these community gardens.

This effort to engage disadvantaged communities in the P-Patches can also have the effect of creating a sense of belonging in a new city for recent immigrants by providing a space to showcase skills and alternative types of food or techniques for growing than are traditional here, while still growing a bountiful harvest. Sue McGann, the garden manager of Marra Farm, which has an experimental program in large tract market gardening for the south Seattle Mien community, likes to tell a story about how the Mien gardeners have their family members in Southeast Asia send them seeds for the vegetables they have traditionally have grown. Seattle has a very different climate than that of Southeast Asia, so first, family in California tries to grow these seeds and save those that produce. These seeds are then sent to the Mien community gardeners in Seattle where they try their luck with these hardier seeds and keep saving the most resilient until they are able to grow vegetables from home in the Seattle P-Patch gardens. This produce can then be sold as part of the CSA and also eaten by the growers. These types of stories show the potential that growing culturally appropriate food has for both sharing traditional culture with other Seattleites while preserving parts of that culture within the community. These

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<sup>95</sup> "Urban Gardening for Seattle's East African Population."

sorts of actions can help immigrant communities start to feel a sense of worth in a new place by utilizing skills they may have, while also being given access to the resources and support of (in this particular case) benevolent city government. This puts some control and power back in the hands of often disenfranchised people.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The Seattle P-Patch program provides some insight and development to the questions asked in the introduction, and also raises new ideas on how garden organizations can work to evolve with their host communities. First, the Program exemplifies the advantage of having financial and symbolic support of gardening organizations. This provides more stability for gardeners and encouragement of sustained volunteerism as well as provides for increased opportunities for involvement from diverse groups than a program with less funding and less advocacy.

Second, the P-Patch's Market Garden and CSA programs have been successful examples of programs which embody the full gamut of urban agriculture goals. Although many of these organizations are non-profit, and do not allow farmers to sell their produce, profitability is an added benefit which likely attracts more gardeners for whom otherwise would have little impetus to become involved. It also allows for low-income people to find work in an inclusive field, in a situation which is fair for workers and consumers. This is something to be considered as we look at other gardening organizations – if the lack of a financial benefit discourages volunteerism from lower-income groups.

Third, the P-Patch navigates the tricky situation of imposing gardens in communities which may not have specifically requested or organized for one. In the introduction, I discuss Pudup's differentiation between the third-party organized garden *projects* versus the organically



arising community-organized garden.<sup>96</sup> She questions the possibility of community empowerment that can come from these potentially paternalistic situations. The P-Patch program walks this line between the two situations, veering to one side in different contexts, but generally provides third-party support for organically arising gardens, while simultaneously falls more in the category of the organized garden project especially in the case of the Cultivating Community programs. However, even in these situations the Program works to shift leadership into the hands of local community members which then counteracts the potential lack of agency or local representation implicit in a garden organized by an outside group. Again, this analysis is situational, but shows that it is possible to have success with these forms and to combine the two into a successful fusion with the positive aspects of both types of community garden organizations.

When I first began reading about the Thistle P-Patch, I jotted down the thoughts – “*Is community building essential?* Part of the beauty of the gardens is the ability for members to determine what the gardens are for. While community building is an express goal, some gardens and gardeners emphasize productivity above all else.” While this is still a legitimate question, as I have continued to consider the effects of the P-Patch’s flexible attitude – that they would allow for a garden to leave out a seemingly basic structure (a community gathering space) – this action actually creates a space that works for the users and allows them to feel like their needs are being met. This, then, is actually more inclusive and accessible for the groups represented in that neighborhood. Gardeners will actually use this space since they designed it, and thus the flexibility provides an untraditional but more effective way to build community, or at least a sense of belonging, than a symbolic gesture like building a community gazebo might have. It

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<sup>96</sup> See page 19, and Pudup, Mary Beth. “It takes a garden: cultivating citizen-subjects in organized garden projects.” *Geoforum*: 39 (2008) 1228-1240.

follows, then, that perhaps for some neighborhoods the gazebo is exactly what will bring together garden users. Design must be responsive to neighborhood needs.

As discussed, the representation of communities' particularities in the garden has the potential to create more social capital and inclusivity for the users of the garden. As Hou says in his analysis:

...gardens are often reflective of the cultural practices of the users. They provide places where the multiculturalism of contemporary cities can be supported and expressed. They bring together 'strangers in the city' and 'multiple publics' to interact with each other and find individual and collective refuges within the urban environment.<sup>97</sup>

These spaces have the potential to be a leveler for diverse groups: no one has a leg up in the garden and all growing styles are functional and respected. At the same time, these diverse groups are brought together both within that specific garden and through the larger network of Seattle P-Patch gardeners through the opportunities provided by the program and by the individual organizers at each particular site. There is great potential for these gardens to be seen as experiments with democratic space within a changing city.

As shown, the P-Patch's work provides representation for modern-day Seattle gardeners in whatever form that needs to take. Although the gardens may look quite different from the large-tract, truck farms of the Desimone, Marra and Picardo families, these productive agricultural spaces are beginning to have the same longevity and neighborhood place-making effects that these historical Seattle families once enjoyed. Seattleites are bringing the city back to the agricultural roots in a modern, creative way. As contemporary Seattle residents continue to garden and create their own urban agricultural traditions, new garden names and histories continually created in these P-Patches will reflect a changing tide of Seattle history; one that is both more representative and sustainable.

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<sup>97</sup> Hou, Jeffrey. 177.



## Chapter 2: Lettuce Link and Marra Farm

In South Seattle, just inside the city limits, lies the neighborhood of South Park. South Park is located in industrial Seattle – here, where some of the richest soil used to be found, is now home to a chaotic mix of industrial and residential uses. Homes and backyards are adjacent to factories; a freeway slices through the neighborhood. The heavily polluted and industrialized Duwamish River cuts this area off from mainland Seattle, and life goes on in this neighborhood largely forgotten by the rest of the city. There are no supermarkets, and of the three ways to reach South Park from Seattle, one of them, an ailing bridge, was closed in 2010. It has been classified as a food desert, which makes the work of Lettuce Link’s Marra Farm all the more important.

Smack dab in the middle of South Park, between a recycling center and a highway, Marra Farm coexists as a fully-functional 8-acre piece of historic farmland. Many different programs take place on this land, but in this chapter, I will focus on the work of Lettuce Link – a program which works to grow and distribute fresh food to food banks. They coordinate donations from Seattle P-Patches, but their most important program is their work in the one-acre Giving Garden at Marra Farm, where all of the produce raised is donated to the local food bank. Given that the South Park neighborhood is an area prone to food insecurity, the need for this service is essential. The Farm accomplishes much more than just contributing to the emergency food system in terms of engaging volunteers and educating youth, yet encounters challenges in creating deeper ties with the surrounding neighborhood as a non-profit organization. The organization walks the line at times between greater and less success with these issues of inclusion of the local community, but it is not for lack of effort. Changes in leadership, funding and organization have led Lettuce Link’s active involvement in South Park to shift over time, especially with consideration to the

particular context and demographics of the neighborhood. These challenges of generating participation from the local community beg the question of the necessity of such neighborhood-specific localness in the running of the farm, especially when the goals of the farm are to serve the community, not to further burden it. Despite these obstacles, however, Lettuce Link still provides essential services and opportunities for growth not only to South Park but also to Seattle as a regional whole through education and inspiration.

Lettuce Link is run by a larger organization, Solid Ground, which fights against urban poverty through various programs. Its mission statement reads:

“Solid Ground works to end poverty and undo racism and other oppressions that are root causes of poverty... We believe our community can move beyond poverty and oppression to a place where all people have access to quality housing, nutritious food, equal justice and opportunities to thrive... We value collaboration and leadership from the communities we serve.”<sup>98</sup>

Within this context, Lettuce Link works for food justice, with the goals of alleviating hunger and providing access to fresh foods for impoverished people. Lettuce Link began in 1988 as a small program which connected P-Patch gardeners who had grown extra produce to donate to local food banks that needed fresh food, as well as providing support and education to help other begin to grow for food banks.<sup>99</sup> This continued and expanded until 1998, when Lettuce Link became involved with the restoration of the former Marra-Desimone Farm in South Park, and began cultivating its own one-acre Giving Garden on the site, sharing the 8 total acres with the P-Patch Program, Seattle Youth Garden Works and the Mien Community Garden.<sup>100</sup> The project started off small – the garden manager, Sue McGann, used to do the gardening work herself, and was the only paid employee on site, but it has expanded to be run today by Sue, an AmeriCorps

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<sup>98</sup> *Solid Ground - Home*. Web. 04 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.solid-ground.org/Pages/Default.aspx>>.

<sup>99</sup> "Solid Ground - Lettuce Link." *Solid Ground - Home*. Web. 04 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.solid-ground.org/Programs/Nutrition/Lettuce/Pages/default.aspx>>.

<sup>100</sup> Hou, Jeffrey. *Greening Cities, Growing Communities*. University of Washington Press, 2010. 127.

volunteer, a few interns, and an army of volunteers. An active kids program is conducted on site, and in 2010, 22,000 lbs of produce were donated from the farm.<sup>101</sup> Robin DeCook, an employee of Lettuce Link and one of Marra Farm's former AmeriCorps volunteers, explained that despite this growth, "I think the original goals were always about getting fresh, nutritious produce that's grown right around here...to people who need it. So that's a grounding principle...but we've evolved into doing more education, both through the children's program...but also through the volunteer base that comes to the farm – but it's become clear that there's a real hunger for knowledge about this."<sup>102</sup>

This aspect of education is one of the parts that Sue McGann, the garden manager, is most passionate about. But that is not saying much – she is a very passionate person, and this, I firmly believe, is in large part why Marra Farm's Giving Garden has been so successful. A small, wiry woman, Sue has been at the garden since the beginning. Every new volunteer group that comes in for a work party is delivered what we call her "spiel" – a half-hour lecture on the history of Marra Farm and why, in a larger context, this farm is important. In this half hour, Sue covers ecology, social justice, politics, and current events. The latter aspect always keeps the lectures relevant – over the summer I worked at the Farm, Sue had a new addition to the talk at least every few weeks. Be it a policy change, evolution of super-bugs, or the e-coli outbreak in Germany, Sue is able to illustrate the contemporary threat that factory farming presents. And she knows what she is talking about – Sue remembers when she was younger, being a client at a food bank herself and the only options being "white bread and potatoes."<sup>103</sup> This personal experience, and the years of dedication to the farm gives Sue seemingly endless energy: she works six days a

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<sup>101</sup> "Solid Ground - Marra Farm Giving Garden." *Solid Ground - Home*. Web. 04 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.solid-ground.org/Programs/Nutrition/Marra/Pages/default.aspx>>.

<sup>102</sup> DeCook, Robin. Personal interview. 11 Aug. 2011.

<sup>103</sup> "Seattle Sprouts Urban Farms." Interview by Audrey Quinn. *KUOW News*. KUOW. Seattle, 1 Apr. 2010. Radio.

week with huge groups of varying skill levels, ages and energy levels, and takes it all in stride. It truly would not be Marra Farm without her presence.

### **Volunteerism and Benefits**

While Sue is the foundation of Marra Farm, interns and volunteers are also essential to the farm's success. Apart from the winter off-season, volunteer groups usually come three times per week from various organizations – schools, businesses and individuals, to help out. This endless care and energy (as well as over a century of organic agriculture enriching the soil) is what makes this garden so productive. Volunteers also help operate the giving garden program at 30 P-Patches and to conduct the Fruit Tree Harvest program, where Lettuce Link volunteers harvest fruit from neighborhood fruit trees. Lettuce Link also conducts seed distributions, where seeds are given for free to low-income P-Patch gardeners and at food banks, and is now coordinating the new Seattle Community Farm in another Seattle neighborhood. The program seems to have the bases covered, which would truly not be possible without the work of volunteers.

This essential structure of the program is why a sustained culture of volunteerism is so important to Lettuce Link. However, given the volunteer policies, the continued success of Marra Farm's work is somewhat surprising. Unlike the P-Patch program, the work that takes place at the Giving Garden is all collective – there are no concrete individual benefits to the work that volunteers do at the garden, besides philanthropic effects. The average volunteer does not take home produce, and essentially just spends a day sweating for no pay. However, the aspect of *collective* work differentiates this from the P-Patch's model: volunteers actually work together collaboratively, rather than just alongside each other in individual plots. Interactions are much more likely to be truly social, as volunteers chat while weeding or turning a bed together. This

makes meaningful interactions and friendship building more likely. Regular volunteers get to know each other rather quickly. This difference could potentially be what sustains volunteerism in a place where tangible benefits to the individual are absent.

Direct benefits to the larger South Park community, however, abound. First and primarily, the success of the main goal of Lettuce Link - fresh food in the emergency food system, is obvious. As Paige Collins, the director of Providence Regina House (South Park's food bank) says: "On Saturdays, most of those 250 families show up in the span of 2½ hours – when the food bank serves fresh produce from Marra Farm... We love Lettuce Link. They show up and it's like magic... The demand for our food in general has gone up...and this is as good as it gets."<sup>104</sup> In a community where the 'poverty tax' limits access to healthy, organic foods, this input is a boon. Lettuce Link has been credited with helping to make 'sustainable' accessible. Sustainable and organic food can be associated with elitism: "People committed to eating sustainable foods like to insist that they're driven by a moral directive from on high, but those lower to the ground still see it as a privilege. Sustainable food simply isn't as accessible or affordable for lower income families, and unless people start talking about that fact, elitism will continue to dog the sustainability conversation," writes Angela Garbes in the *Seattle Weekly*. She went on, however, to credit Lettuce Link with providing avenues for lower-income people to share in sustainable, healthy eating. "It's supporting programs like this... that would help people see the benefits of sustainability."<sup>105</sup>

Beyond this, the land at Marra Farm itself provides a green space for the neighborhood. Although the South Park area is by no means tree-less, there is a value in 8 acres of green land

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<sup>104</sup> Shepard, Arla. "Lettuce Gather to Honor a Productive Plot." *The Seattle Times* 9 Aug. 2008.

<sup>105</sup> Garbes, Angela. "How to Make "Sustainable" Accessible?" *The Seattle Weekly Blogs*. 4 Sept. 2009. Web. 06 Nov. 2011. <[http://blogs.seattleweekly.com/voracious/2009/09/how\\_to\\_make\\_sustainable\\_access.php](http://blogs.seattleweekly.com/voracious/2009/09/how_to_make_sustainable_access.php)>.



which buffers the highway and industrial noise. Families, children and the schools benefit from the children's education program and local gardeners benefit from the gardening resource.

### **Inclusion of the South Park Neighborhood**

Despite these decided rewards to the community, there is a lack of effective inclusion of the community at Marra Farm's Giving Garden. Young children from the neighborhood are actively incorporated into the Lettuce Link community through the school program, yet the majority of participants with the Giving Garden are from greater Seattle. This, however, is not for lack of effort on the part of the program, and the presence of local community members within Lettuce Link has fluctuated over the thirteen years at the garden. In the past, specific programs have been in place to attract interest and participants from South Park. Up until 2010, a program called Seattle Youth Garden Works partnered at Marra Farm. This program employed at-risk and homeless youth in gardening and garden education, which they sold at a local farmers market. While a partner, they actively recruited from South Park. DeCook explains that since the program discontinued the partnership with Marra Farm for financial reasons, they have noticed an increase in vandalism and graffiti, perhaps because of less of a feeling of youth and neighborhood ownership of the space. Similarly, in 2004, Lettuce Link received a grant from the city and was able to hire a few community members, who spoke a few of the languages represented in the area, who would organize potlucks and work parties. DeCook says that they had the most local involvement during this period.

Outreach is still accomplished by other means, but with limited success in terms of physically bringing more local participants to the garden. Lettuce Link sends interns and volunteers to the food bank to cook with the produce provided that week – both to demonstrate possibilities with potentially unfamiliar vegetables, but also to connect a face and an organization

to the food. This creates a link for the clients, and a potential for further involvement. However, demographic specifics of the community potentially preclude much involvement from many of the clients they serve and the South Park community at large. South Park is a “majority-minority” area, with 12.5% poverty and a high immigrant population.<sup>106</sup> With residents working sometimes two or even three jobs, with kids, there is simply less time to donate. The Giving Garden’s volunteer hours are Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, from 10 to 2. These are primarily during the workweek – this alone impedes many potential volunteers. DeCook spoke to this issue in an interview:

I think the people in South Park are generally appreciative but not super knowledgeable about the farm...I don’t think there’s anyone that resents us, there’s no ill-will, but there are a lot of people in that neighborhood that are trying really hard to make ends meet or working two jobs, so if they can be involved in their kids’ school or their church or something outside the rest of their lives, that’s all they have time and room for, so people who don’t live within a few blocks of the farm surprisingly don’t know it’s there.<sup>107</sup>

Beyond this simple volunteer policy conflict, however, cultural histories have to be acknowledged as well, along with the privilege that comes from gardening for pleasure. Considering South Park’s high Latino population, and with the history of agricultural work under inhumane conditions that some of these families have experienced in the past, there has been some resistance from a few families to the idea of spending time gardening, or wanting their children to develop an interest in farming.<sup>108</sup> DeCook says of this issue: “It’s been an ongoing challenge to envision how [volunteerism] might work in a culturally appropriate way...

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<sup>106</sup> 37% Hispanic/Latino, 34% white, 14% Asian, 7% Black, 8% other.

Hou, Jeffrey. *Greening Cities, Growing Communities*. University of Washington Press, 2010. 127.

<sup>107</sup> DeCook.

<sup>108</sup> Hou, Jeffrey. 127.

sometimes we think [of] digging in the dirt and saving the world, but many of these families have parents that were farm workers and digging in the dirt is totally different.”<sup>109</sup>

This lack of participation from community members within the activities of the Giving Garden, however, may not necessarily be a problem. First, considering the purpose and structure of the Giving Garden at Lettuce Link – a place for people to share their time to help those in need, as well as the benefits of volunteering described above, it is more likely to attract people who have the leisure to help out. The garden is intended to be a service to the poor in South Park: those who have the time and resources to help out are growing food for donation, and receiving nothing besides social interactions and feeling good about themselves for it. This balance makes it unlikely that the people for whom it is directly intended to serve will have the time to help out, and this is fine – the point is to help, not further burden the community. Additionally, Laura Lawson and Janni Sorenson explain the problematic assumptions which underlay attitudes that require local participation in organized garden projects:<sup>110</sup> “The compulsory nature of some community action underscores a societal philosophy of personal responsibility for improving one’s community, even when the problems being faces extend far beyond it.”<sup>111</sup> Residents of wealthier neighborhoods are not expected to care for their public parks, and are not expected to cultivate their own produce unless they want to – these amenities are provided for them by grocery stores and the city government. Thus it is unfair to assume that residents of low-income neighborhoods should have to provide these services for themselves. If there are volunteers who

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<sup>109</sup> DeCook.

<sup>110</sup> Here, I borrow Mary Beth Pudup’s terminology, described in the introduction, of an “organized garden project” as opposed to a community garden. This term is a good fit for a program like Lettuce Link, which is organized by an outside party in order to accomplish a specific social goal. Refer to this article or the brief summary provided for more background on the potential for paternal attitudes towards garden participants in these community gardening projects.

<sup>111</sup> Lawson, Laura, and Janni Sorenson. "When Overwhelming Needs Meet Underwhelming Prospects." *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. Ed. Jeffrey Hou. New York: Routledge, 2010.

have the time and enthusiasm to do this work, then by all means, they may. But an organization can't assume that residents will want to work for them just because they live close by— and it seems that Robin DeCook and the other organizers of Lettuce Link understand this balance, as shown in her explanation of demographics and involvement.<sup>112</sup>

The problem with this rationale is that it could be construed as an excuse on the part of the organization to not be as critical of their involvement with the community or how it could be improved. I doubt that this is the case with Lettuce Link: Lettuce Link's success with community outreach has fluctuated throughout the years, and as shown, this is due to institutional, financial and situational constraints. It is also important to emphasize that the challenges seen with South Park involvement are only seen in one portion of Marra Farm. Lettuce Link's work is only one of the 8 acres at Marra Farm – the P-Patch and the Mien Community Garden both attract many community participants, likely because of the individual benefits that come from work in these programs and the factor of being community-organized. Further, within Lettuce Link's acre, the Children's Garden is a space of very successful local involvement.

### **Lettuce Link's Children's Program**

The Children's Garden at Marra Farm is tended by students from Concord Elementary school, which is within walking distance of the farm. This takes place during an afternoon program during the school year and through summer camps, where the weekly trip to the farm is a field trip. This program is an example of active outreach to the community, with the goals of increasing environmental education and children's health. Sue McGann says that the “most important thing we do here is grow gardeners...kids are growing a connection to food and nature.” She uses the term ‘nature-deficit disorder’ to underscore the importance of this sort of experience for modern children and emphasizes that the care of the planet is in the hands of these

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<sup>112</sup> Page 7.

kids some day, so we better teach them about how to care for it.<sup>113</sup> From my experience helping with this program during the summer of 2010, this education is necessary, and there is no lack of enthusiasm on the part of the kids.

Working with the children was by far the most rewarding part of the summer at Marra Farm. We had three different groups of children coming from YMCA and South Park Community Center camps: two were pre-Kindergarten; the other was 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade. Many had been to the farm before, from the school program, but some were new to gardening altogether. I remember one boy from the older group who tried to act a little tough during our opening circle and our first activity, but when we started planting seeds that first week - each child is allotted a small plot for the summer- his nervous questions about every step of the process (“Did I water enough? Do my rows look straight? Should I put more dirt on top?”) revealed his excitement and care for the plants. Even just the fascination the kids had with bugs and dirt were wonderful to witness. On the soil exploration day, we would spend half an hour just digging in the decomposing food scraps and soil from the worm bins looking at all the action taking place. I was worried before that the kids would be bored (which is always a recipe for disaster with young kids) but they loved it, and most days afterwards, would ask to play in the worm bins. Success!

At the beginning of the summer we had a volunteer orientation for the kids’ programs which was mostly a diversity-awareness discussion, which shows the premium Lettuce Link (and Solid Ground) places on making the programs accessible and appropriate for all. Michelle Bates-Benetua, Lettuce Link’s coordinator, acknowledged that we as volunteers come from, typically, a more privileged position than the children we will be working with at the camps and as such we need to be respectful and conscious of our words and actions, especially in this particular context

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<sup>113</sup> "Marra Farm" Interview by John Jeffcoat. *Community Stories*. Seattle Channel. 26 Jan. 2009. Television.

of teaching about food. This was indeed a potentially delicate balance because the goal of the camp was to allow the children to develop an appreciation for healthy, fresh foods, but many of them come from families who may not have access to these foods in their homes. We wanted to educate, but not belittle or scorn foods they might eat in their homes; we wanted to encourage kids to play in the dirt, while respecting that a constant supply of clean clothes was not always possible for some families. What I found particularly impressive about this discussion was that our interaction with each group of children was only for 2 hours per week, thus this emphasis was all the more pronounced. This gesture demonstrates the precedence that Lettuce Link puts on proactively creating and maintaining positive relationships with the host community, perhaps despite the trouble they have encouraging neighborhood participation.

### **Connecting the City**

This summer I asked my friend Roger, who was another regular volunteer, how he came upon Marra Farm. He had just moved here from Peru and needed activities to pass the time that he was not in English classes, and volunteering at Marra Farm seemed to me like an obscure project. However, he told me that he had simply done an online search of “volunteer Seattle” or something along those lines, and Marra Farm kept appearing in the results. This is likely an added bonus of the longevity and success that Marra Farm has had, but from my impression, it does seem to be one of the premier volunteer opportunities for many groups. Most Tuesdays and Fridays we would have some sort of youth group scheduled for a work party, and on Saturdays we would get all kinds. In addition to the regular individual volunteers, we once had a 70-person group of Google employees, or once a 40-person group of employees of a hotel chain. Every day, I would work alongside very different people in the beds. This in itself was an adventure: having conversations with people who often approached Marra Farm or the idea of urban

agriculture with very different perspectives. The ability of the Giving Garden at Marra Farm to bring together and engage such wide-ranging groups working in the soil for a common goal is a way in which Marra Farm is actually quite broadly inclusive, but in a different sense. Perhaps it is more fitting to expect Seattle as the city to be the (larger) community which participates at the farm when it is organized from outside the neighborhood.

According to Lettuce Link, in 2010, 1,800 volunteers contributed 7,200 hours at Marra Farm. Although undoubtedly many of these volunteers will not continue to incorporate gardening or food justice work into their lives in the future, that is still 1,800 people listening to Sue's spiel and spending time in a space that is decidedly contrary to much of the urban environment. Ideally, this grows supporters of the program and of sustainable food, provides opportunities for reconnecting people with their food city-wide and creates opportunities for dialogue amongst people who otherwise might not have these conversations. When the group of Google employees volunteered, I remember working with 6 of them as we completely weeded, prepared the soil and planted pepper plants on a bed, a full four hours of work. These six employees did not know each other before, as they worked on different campuses and in different departments, but we were able to talk business and also about the environment and their thoughts on agriculture, urban sustainability, and potentials for social change. We ended up having a really enjoyable day, and were all able to interact with different people and in a completely different setting than our normal lives, which has its own value. It is impossible to say if these relationships built are maintained, but these types of interactions exemplify the potential that community gardens have for bringing people together through collective work.

Beyond this value as an educational resource to the greater Seattle community, these corporate and large school volunteer groups have a value in simply providing labor. One acre is a

lot of land to maintain, and while there was a regular group of around eight to ten people who could be relied upon to show up at least once per week, these groups provide the horsepower necessary to simply keep the farm running. As Robin DeCook admits: "...at least for produce sustainability, the corporate groups are really key because they come and they love Sue and are so impressed and they write checks personally and write checks from their business and donate in-kind things so I think there's definitely a place for corporate volunteers."<sup>114</sup> These groups provide funding and resources (whether in money or labor) which are essential to the continued success of the garden. It is a donation of time and energy to a good cause, and simultaneously provides a social and educational benefit to the volunteer groups. However, as Mares and Peña point out, "The individuals and families who are involved are...providing a benefit as they actively maintain of the two substantial agricultural spaces left in the city. There is no doubt that much work is needed to ensure that the farm is a resource available to and representative of the local community."<sup>115</sup> As previously discussed, this statement is valid, but it is also crucial to recognize both the support that the city-wide volunteers provide and the benefit that Marra Farm provides to them as well, not just to the local community.

### **Partnerships and Leadership**

At the close of the previous chapter, I had argued that flexibility of programming allowed for the P-Patches to successfully accommodate neighborhood needs. We might ask, then, why do we need alternatives to the P-Patch program if it is so responsive? The easy explanation for this is that Marra Farm is focused on alleviating hunger and provides opportunities for low-income people who do not have time, energy or interest in gardening to access fresh organic foods,

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<sup>114</sup> DeCook.

<sup>115</sup> Mares, Teresa M., and Devon G. Peña. "Urban Agriculture in the Making of Insurgent Spaces in Los Angeles and Seattle." *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. Ed. Jeffrey Hou. New York: Routledge, 2010. 241-53.



whereas P-Patches provide space for people to be self-sufficient. Even with market gardens, the impetus is on the individual to help themselves by gardening, whereas Marra Farm creates a space for people who want to garden to help those who need food. DeCook explains: “Within Seattle at least, Marra Farm was the only organization doing any work like this that was thinking about it from a hunger perspective.”<sup>116</sup> Marra Farm also has more of a focus on youth education than the P-Patches do.

Another essential difference from the P-Patches is that the Marra program is *not* city-run. Again, this was shown to be a benefit to gardens in the previous chapter, but the Giving Garden at Marra Farm has the advantage of having a city partnership – it is on city land, but is managed by a non-profit organization. To some, this absence of city bureaucracy in management is one of the more important characteristics of Lettuce Link- that the organization and users can self-determine land usage and management, and become anxious seeing the City of Seattle grow more interested in the program. Mares and Peña explain this sentiment:

As a self-proclaimed ‘Green City’ Seattle has a vested interest in the environmentally sustainable practices occurring at the farm. It is foreseeable that the city will continue to draw upon the environmental stewardship that occurs at the farm as examples of ‘green’ efforts, raising important questions about how, and to what ends is the city taming, harnessing and harvesting both the labor and the identities of those working at Marra Farm.<sup>117</sup>

To what extent does the involvement by the city hinder the independence that Marra Farm has in asserting itself as a space counter to the “expansion of the neo-liberal grid city”?<sup>118</sup> In a certain sense, the very existence of the Giving Garden offers an underlying critique of broader society, including city leadership. The existence of a farm run by a private organization which serves to

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<sup>116</sup> Robin DeCook.

<sup>117</sup> Mares, Teresa M., and Devon G. Peña.

<sup>118</sup> Mares and Peña.

supplement a city welfare program indirectly reflects poorly on the ability of that city to provide for its citizens.

### **Lessons Learned from Lettuce Link**

This line which Marra Farm must straddle--between catering to the larger Seattle community versus the smaller neighborhood community; and between providing services versus encouraging activism--is representative of two divergent types of rhetoric found about the role of urban gardens. As Mares and Peña show, urban gardens provide avenues for empowering their participants and strengthening networks by connecting people with their food:

...Marra Farm...reveal[s] the promising connections between urban agriculture and struggles for food sovereignty, a concept that combines the rich notion of community food security with the idea that food sources should be consistent with cultural identities and involve community networks that promote self-reliance and mutual aid.<sup>119</sup>

This notion, while perhaps not outwardly requiring it, encourages and idealizes the idea of individuals being directly engaged in food production. Especially in “food desert” situations, this is thought of as a solution, and/or an opportunity to implement these ideas in a place where the food will make a real impact on the local food supply.

Yet it is also problematic to assume that low-income families need to be put in a position of having to become ‘empowered’ to solve problems that are being created by much larger systems than they do not and cannot control. “Whereas in most American cities, parks and open spaces are typically the responsibility of public agencies... recent trends towards ‘public-private partnerships’ acknowledge the limited resources within municipalities...” explains Lawson and Sorenson.<sup>120</sup> This idea applies directly to Marra Farm as a green space, but can also be extended to food security. While most neighborhoods have grocery stores, South Park does not, and the

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<sup>119</sup> Mares and Peña.

<sup>120</sup> Lawson and Sorenson.

food banks do not provide adequately fresh and nutritious food – thus, this is a failure of both the market and the government to look out for residents. Nonprofits can provide this, but not without increased effort from the neighborhood, and while at times this can be seen as ‘community empowerment,’ as Lawson and Sorenson put it:

When structural inequality and the hidden/invisible power are not acknowledged, processes meant to build ‘power to’ (be empowering) can leave participants and their organizations feeling disempowered because the complex interconnection among environmental, economic, and social concerns affecting low-income communities of color has been ignored... self-help alone cannot address all concerns.<sup>121</sup>

These ideas could be read as conflicting--one idea stipulating that the solution to inequalities is to ‘empower individuals’ to make the changes for themselves, while the other acknowledges that structural inequalities show this first theory to be an insufficient response; that the powers that be should be providing these services. The first is an inspirational idea, but needs to be reconciled with unfair expectations of participation. However, if we change the context of community food sovereignty and picture this on a more regional level, then these two ideas can be much more compatible, and Marra Farm exemplifies how this balance can be struck. On a city-wide level, there is a large enough supply of enthusiastic volunteer labor to keep the farm running, good food is being provided to those who need it, and no groups are being excluded from space or the opportunities it provides. This same philosophy in terms of a regional approach of connecting the greater regional community to their food also applies to sourcing the food, not only the labor to grow it. DeCook explains this concept:

“When [we think about] how people talk about urban farming ... Sue likes to talk about how it’s not the answer, it’s part of the answer, but it’s not *the* answer. [Sue’s] garden didn’t do very well this winter, so she got a CSA... and she loved it, she was getting oranges and things from California, and I was really surprised because... Sue is über-local and she was like ‘No, they have things we can’t grow and it’s not wrong to want to share them, it just makes sense to share them from

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<sup>121</sup> Lawson and Sorenson.

the closest. She was like I would like to buy oranges from California rather than Florida. And that we need to think regionally rather than super-locally. So she would say the West coast is a region and you've got New England to Florida is a region, and the middle section, and to... think of food that way. You know, we're not going to grow all our food in the city, we're not going to grow all our food in the county, and people who think that are crazy. You know, maybe they can grow their own, but if you're going to... change it on a larger level, you've got to think a little bit a bigger picture.<sup>122</sup>

With a more inclusive vision of what 'local food' means -- both where it is grown and who grows it-- local, sustainable agriculture becomes more accessible and more of a reasonable proposition to people who may have been skeptical of feasibility or felt excluded from the ideas.

Marra Farm is a demonstration of the effectiveness of this regional approach. Thinking of Marra Farm as a supplemental link--essential, yet not all-encompassing--makes it more possible to look at the Giving Garden program from a realistic perspective while still recognizing areas for potential growth. I have identified these areas as furthering inclusivity or incorporation of the neighborhood community (while staying mindful of the nuanced issues associated with expectations of community action from a non-profit organization), as well as the challenges of remaining independent in organization and philosophy from the city government, yet remaining supported by the city. Lettuce Link's work at Marra Farm continues to evolve and remain conscious of these areas of tension, yet a new generation of urban gardening organizations are beginning to organize and move forward with varying perspectives on these challenges. Lettuce Link just opened the new Seattle Community Farm, located in a neighborhood with similar demographics (lower-income, majority-minority) yet a different history, and is altering its policies and ideas (discussed in Chapter 3) with deliberate intentions to learn from the last decade at Marra Farm to create greater success in this new location.

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<sup>122</sup> DeCook.



## Chapter 3: The Newest Crop of Gardens

In the last few years many new organizations beyond the P-Patches have grown up and are both run by idealistic young activist farmers as well as attracting interest among young volunteers. While Seattle has always had a vibrant urban gardening scene, this new influx of organizations has taken community gardens and urban agriculture overall much more into the mainstream. These organizations take many different shapes – new gardens on vacant lots, collectives which pick fruit from existing underused fruit trees for donation, online resource-sharing hubs, and others, but the essence of these new groups are that they are “DIY” in spirit and work to broaden the base of interest in gardening while working outside of the constraints of the more established organizations. Although these gardens and gardeners are not partnered with city government or the P-Patch program, the city government’s liberal policies towards gardening as a legitimate use of space has allowed these new organizations to develop without the same legal hoops that the more established programs have had to go through as far as occupying space and creating partnerships. While some critics ask why these new organizations don’t simply take advantage of the existing infrastructure of the more established programs to accomplish their goals, the beauty of these new programs is that they have succeeded in broadening the base of support for urban gardening in the city while working towards their own goals and keeping the projects small-scale. These newer projects fill in the gaps in the alternative food system to create a more thorough and realistic vision of urban sustainability than the older gardens could produce alone. Further, the growing diversity of manifestations of urban agriculture creates more avenues of access for more Seattleites. However, as more divergent organizations crop up, questions of how localized garden organizations will endure in a large, interconnected city remain prescient as ever.

## Alleycat Acres

In January 2010, a new gardening group came together, becoming somewhat of a local-news darling of the year. This organization was new, snazzy, youthful and associated itself with the “guerilla gardening” movement, something that just *sounds* exciting. The organization was written up in local newspapers, and was reported about on local radio stations prolifically throughout the first half of 2010. This group is called “Alleycat Acres,” and their goal is to combine its organizer’s two passions – sustainable food and biking. “Alleycat” is a term used by bike messengers for informal urban bike races, and “acres” comes from the term used measure land.<sup>123</sup> Its core mission is very simple: “Alleycat Acres is an urban farming collective that aims to reconnect people with food. To achieve this, we create community-run farms on underutilized urban spaces.”<sup>124</sup> They operate by growing food on unused urban land, the first piece of which they are borrowing from a land-owner who responded to an ad on a local blog, and whose only requests were that it be “quiet and neat.”<sup>125</sup> The eleven organizers were shocked by the “overwhelming enthusiasm and surprising momentum” of the response to their first work parties. They hosted ‘crop mobs’ – designated days where they would email and blast their social media sites to get the word out and get as many volunteers as possible to do the heavy lifting. On one occasion, even Mayor Mike McGinn showed up to lend a hand. It appeared that Alleycat Acres would be a bona fide success – but one which looked somewhat unlike the successful projects of the past.

The primary distinction is that the goals and methods of approaching these goals differ. On a surface level, Alleycat Acres may appear much the same as Marra Farm. Currently,

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<sup>123</sup> Ramirez, Marc. "Breaking Ground on an Urban Farm for the Needy on Beacon Hill." *The Seattle Times* 28 Feb. 2010. Web.

<sup>124</sup> "Our Story." *Alleycat Acres // Urban Farming Collective*. Web. 18 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.alleycatacres.com/2009/12/who-are-we.html>>.

<sup>125</sup> Ramirez, Marc.

volunteer groups work to cultivate crops which are donated to food banks in the neighborhood. However, for Alleycat Acres, this is just a starting point. Their initial goal was to run a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program through the lots, to which local residents could subscribe to on a short-term, sliding-scale payment basis. Although initially challenged by city policies which restricted the ability to sell produce grown on areas that were not zoned for gardens, in August 2010, as a result of City of Seattle's "Year of Urban Agriculture," this ruling was reversed. New legislation was approved which allows farmers to grow and sell food grown in all city zones and on private property.<sup>126</sup> Since then, the Alleycats have found that the volume and variety of produce was not sufficient to support a CSA, but have partnered with an existing CSA distributor, "Clean Greens", to deliver their produce boxes by bike within Central Seattle.<sup>127</sup> This model of a CSA is unique in the city: providing accessibility to fresh, local foods to people who may not be clients of a food bank (who are provided for by Lettuce Link's giving gardens, for example) but who still may still have difficulties affording or accessing healthy produce. It does not put the burden on individuals to grow the food themselves, as the P-Patch program does. Although Alleycat is not providing the food in this case, their support of this program is important because they provide the essential link of delivering the produce boxes to the customers and simultaneously minimizing Clean Greens' carbon footprint by delivering by bike.

Bicycle transportation is another very unique aspect of Alleycat Acres. Their commitment to a minimized environmental impact is more than just rhetorical – the "alleycats," or group coordinators, deliver the garden's produce to food banks by bikes fitted with a large trailer. Although this would be more difficult for organizations such as Lettuce Link because of

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<sup>126</sup> Falk, Tyler. "Seattle's New Urban-ag Models Are Sprouting in Friendly Soil." *Grist*. 17 Aug. 2010. Web. 17 Nov. 2011.

<sup>127</sup> Banks, Amber. "Alleycat Acres." E-mail interview. 21 Nov. 2011.



its location far South in Seattle, Alleycat is more able to accomplish this because of their central Seattle locations. Not only is this dedication to no-emissions in their work providing concrete environmental benefits, but it is also important in its symbolic message of the possibilities for use of bicycles in a sustainable city. By using bicycles, the Alleycats show, rather than just preach their environmental dedication, and serve as an example of the how an ideal alternative food system would look. This holistic approach to the food system attempts to respond to questions that critics might ask of the potential of an alternative food system to really provide for the *entire* city. Obviously, Alleycat does not do all of the work themselves – they rely on the help of volunteers and the help of strong partnerships with other organizations, but by effectively using resources already existing in the city and not just attempting to accomplish all goals themselves, they provide an idealistic and more realistic vision for sustainable urbanism.

### *Demographics*

Alleycat Acres attracts a younger demographic than Lettuce Link or the P-Patches do. Alleycat is organized by 20 and 30-something Seattleites, and a similar group constitutes most of the volunteer base. This could be potentially problematic – that the farms are exclusive to people outside of the young, hip volunteers. This demographic is likely due to the way in which the program has been organized and is advertized. The steering committee of eleven “Alleycats” came about through social media networking. Sean Conroe, the Lead Alleycat, thought of the idea for an organization of this sort while studying food justice at Seattle Central Community College. He advertized and recruited fellow organizers off of social media sites. While not only young people are online, and increasingly varied groups of people are beginning to use social networking websites, it is likely that this form of outreach does attract a younger crowd of applicants. Currently, a lot of the work for Alleycat Acres happens online: a new step which

differentiates this as an evolution from earlier gardening organizations, which do not have as much of an online presence. Alleycat Acres' own website (alleycatacres.com) is beautifully designed, and contains links to many other organizations, events and Alleycat news. Alleycat Acres also has a strong, active Facebook presence. The separate bicycle CSA-delivery program, called "Fork + Frame" (discussed above) has its' own website as well, designed with equal attention to detail and layout.<sup>128</sup>

The heavy dependence on social media, the way in which the organizations are portray the organization, along with the age and lifestyles of the organizers likely influences the fact that the volunteers from all over the city and are... "mostly 21-35, in school or young professionals with varying degrees of prior gardening experience."<sup>129</sup> This is in contrast to the wide range of demographics of the P-Patch program. While this aspect is something that I would have critiqued according to the same logic with which I discussed the importance of active inclusion of the neighborhoods surrounding Marra Farm and P-Patches, I find that Alleycat Acres needs to be addressed differently. Alleycat Acres, to a greater extent than the organizations of the previous chapters, organize through the gardens themselves (on the ground) as well as through the social media presence online, where organizers discuss and share resources through the web. For example, Lettuce Link, though far more established in Seattle than Alleycat Acres has 178 Facebook "likes," compared to Alleycat Acres' 1,517 "likes."<sup>130</sup> This dual presence creates a physical space and develops local community and well as an online, networked community,

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<sup>128</sup> *Fork + Frame*. Web. 21 Nov. 2011. <<http://forkandframe.com/>>.

<sup>129</sup> Banks, Amber.

<sup>130</sup> As of December 5, 2011.

"Lettuce Link, a Program of Solid Ground " *Facebook*. Web. 05 Dec. 2011. <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Lettuce-Link-a-program-of-Solid-Ground>>.

"Alleycat Acres: Urban Farming Collective." *Facebook*. Web. 05 Dec. 2011. <<https://www.facebook.com/AlleycatAcres>>.

which could be seen as city-wide (or larger) as support and interest comes from many different directions.

Alleycat also recognizes the importance of place-making in their gardens, which is something that takes more of a conscious effort to engage the people surrounding the garden (no matter how much support is gained online, or how many Facebook “likes” Alleycat Acres receives, that is not the same as people meeting each other and sharing experiences while preparing a new bed for planting). For their farm in the Central District, local visibility has been easier to come by, as the garden shares a side with a busy arterial and two of the four steering committee members live within five blocks of the site. But at Beacon Hill, which was also the first site, visibility is more challenging and none of the Alleycats actually live in the area. Thus they have had to work harder to engage with and work respectfully within the community.

Alleycat Amber Banks explained this process:

In Beacon Hill, we took what we could get and since it was our first plot we had to learn how to build relationships with the community. But before we broke ground, we knocked on all of the doors of the houses within a two block radius and introduced ourselves and invited folks out. All of the neighbors [now] know us and the kids come out to help in the summer. People know what nights the work parties are and will come by to get a share of the harvest quite regularly. Many of the volunteers live in Beacon Hill and in many ways its one of our most productive sites. We have a lot of community events/meetings at the Beacon Hill site to help people feel welcome there. We see our relationship with the community as an integral part of what we do. The local neighborhood is involved and/or supportive of the work and the sentiment I have heard most often is appreciation for growing and sharing food.<sup>131</sup>

It is apparent through these actions that Alleycat recognizes the importance of building local, geographic support, especially in this situation of being an outsider to the neighborhood. But while it is still important to Alleycat Acres to reach out to the local communities in which their gardens are placed, which they do, the presence of the entire city in these gardens is also

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<sup>131</sup> Banks, Amber

warranted because of the way in which Alleycat conducts itself online. Despite the fact that a volunteer base hailing from the entire city (rather than mostly from the particular neighborhood) has been a problem at Marra Farm, here, the *online* community building to support these farms makes these volunteer demographics more appropriate.

Alleycat Acres positions itself in a potentially problematic situation with its' work within communities of which they are not necessarily a part, especially with relation to issues of race. Again, however, the organization seems to grasp the complexities of these interactions. One person commented on their website with concerns about their work within communities of color, being a "primarily white organization." Sean Conroe responded, explaining that:

... We recognize that we are working within a complex, multi-layered social landscape, so our community outreach team is actively engaged in collaborating with other organizations to enhance and expand our work to include more people of color... While our focus is on food and farming, we see ourselves as a part of the incredible team of people who are working in Seattle and around the country to address the issues of equity and justice in our communities... In short, we are an urban farming collective that recognizes that social justice is paramount. While our focus is on rethinking how we can productively use vacant, urban spaces, in doing this, we actively engage with community organizations [and]... remain open-minded, humble, diligent and flexible about how we interact with our surrounding environment.<sup>132</sup>

Despite all of these well-meaning statements, however, the fact remains that the demographics of their volunteer base and their base of leadership do not entirely reflect the communities they are working within. This harkens back to the challenges with Marra Farm's volunteer base, but considering the uphill battle that these small-scale organizations face in fulfilling their most basic goals of producing food, how much can reasonably be expected? Further, as Amber Banks explained, the organization is aware of these tensions and has worked actively to address this at their Beacon Hill site by outreach and communication with other organizations. As Alleycat

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<sup>132</sup> 'Sean.' "Comments" *Alleycat Acres // Urban Farming Collective*. 30 Jan. 2011. Web. 19 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.alleycatacres.com/2009/12/who-are-we.html>>.

grows, it must remain critical of how their policies, schedules, and rhetoric affect these processes of inclusion. However, similar to the situation at Marra Farm, they are providing a service to the community and are working as a community-based project with ties to the small neighborhood community and the larger city-wide community that they have reached out to online, which makes the line of who exactly Alleycat should answer to a little blurrier.

This city-wide, active presence online is also in line with the way in which Alleycat works to partner with fellow small food justice organizations' work on a more regional level. A community-specific base is still an important part of community gardens, especially as far as building relationships and empowering volunteers and the neighborhood towards self-sufficiency, but in a realistic vision of a sustainable city, larger networks are necessary, and Alleycat Acres accomplishes both but will have to carefully navigate who they are including and how this occurs to make sure that they are accountable to both their larger and smaller communities.

### **Seattle Community Farm**

The summer after Alleycat Acres had their first harvest at their two locations, Lettuce Link (the organization which runs Marra Farm, discussed in the previous chapter) opened a second farm dedicated exclusively to food-bank donations: the Seattle Community Farm (SCF). The SCF is located in Rainier Valley, another south Seattle neighborhood. It is Seattle's most diverse zip code (and according to some, the most diverse zip code in the country with 59 languages spoken), with many immigrant families mixed in with long-time Seattle residents.<sup>133</sup> Overall, in terms of the need to cater to specific demographics, multiple languages and low-income families, this neighborhood is similar to South Park, home of the original Marra Farm.

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<sup>133</sup> Sharify, John. "Seattle's 98118 Zip Code the Most Diverse in the Country." *KING 5 TV / Seattle News*. 2 Aug. 2010. Web. 23 Nov. 2011. Web. Questions over how "diversity" is quantified, however, remain. Using alternate measurements, there is competition for this title.

This has allowed Lettuce Link to apply many of the lessons learned from Marra Farm to the management of SCF.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Marra Farm has had trouble generating participation from the directly surrounding community at the site. The majority of the volunteers come from the greater Seattle area, while inclusion of South Park residents has been an ongoing challenge. This is due to the structure of the program, and they have had periods of greater success with this aspect in the past when they have been able to specifically reach out with incentives to the local community. Lettuce Link is applying these lessons learned from experiences at Marra Farm to the SCF and being more active in recruitment of volunteer labor from the neighborhood. This is being done in two ways. First, unlike at Marra Farm where volunteers receive nothing besides a positive experience and feeling good about their efforts, SCF has implemented a work-trade system. This means that, while the majority of the produce will still go to food banks, low-income volunteers will receive a bag of produce valued at \$30 for two hours of labor. Robin DeCook of Lettuce Link explained the logic of this decision: "...if you're working in a volunteer model, there definitely needs to be some incentives... people who sign up... don't need any proof, but if you consider yourself low-income, then go for it."<sup>134</sup> This policy creates incentive for people who may not otherwise have the time or incentive to volunteer to get active in this new garden. People who live in the neighborhood who are not food bank clients can still receive concrete benefits from the farm's existence which through this system. This system also likely helps to create a positive relationship with the community which is important as the SCF is a garden project, rather than a more grassroots-grown garden.

The second way in which Lettuce Link is trying to make SCF into more of a 'community' farm than Marra Farm is said to be is by being picky about who volunteers at the farm. DeCook

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<sup>134</sup> DeCook, Robin. "Lettuce Link and Marra Farm." Personal Interview. 11 Aug. 2011.

informed me that SCF will not be accepting the large corporate work parties as Marra Farm does, and even may not accept volunteers as readily who are not from South Seattle. She explained the logic behind this decision:

...with the Seattle community farm [it has been] a very deliberate approach and set-up of doing outreach very differently and very targeted, I would say, really trying to think about ... saying no to volunteers who are not from that neighborhood, which is different... because sometimes it's hard to say no. But really thinking about... [wanting to] build this as a local community. So where we're walking the line right now is that people who are from Rainier Vista obviously, but really anyone who can identify as living in Southeast Seattle, or an organization from Southeast Seattle... with the recognition that sometimes we just need the work done and will take random labor, but really trying to cultivate that.<sup>135</sup>

DeCook admits that this policy needs to be flexible because sometimes work just needs to be done. The farm organizer at SCF and the interns there ran summer camps like those at Marra and also went door-to-door intensively informing and inviting residents to come check out the new farm, as two examples of how SCF is actively working to attract the local residents. However, this 'locals-only' idea is a very different direction to take the garden than Marra Farm has been organized, and also very much in contrast with the way Alleycat Acres is organized. As this farm is quite new at the time of writing (it's first harvest was this summer, 2011) it remains to be seen if this will be a successful or enduring policy, but it is certainly a novel way of combating the problems of local community building that Marra Farm has seen.

Comparing the ideas which influence Alleycat Acres' methods of organizing and reaching out to their volunteers versus the way that the SCF and Lettuce Link manages their volunteers is interesting because of the perspectives that they reveal about the visions about farming in a sustainable city. On the one hand, SCF's perspective on active inclusion of the local community to the potential exclusion of other volunteers shows the pains to which Lettuce Link -

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<sup>135</sup> DeCook, Robin.

- a nonprofit creating an organized garden *project*-- will go to address issues of diversity and inclusion.<sup>136</sup> On the other hand, Alleycat Acres could be critiqued as not having enough of a focus on these same issues for what is, on the surface, a very similar organization. Instead, volunteers are overall from a more specific age and class demographic, and come from all over the city. However, Alleycat seems to be more engaged with working together with other organizations to accomplish broader goals (not only giving gardens, but city-wide food security), and most of these partnerships are with other budding, new organizations. While I appreciate SCF and Lettuce Link's dedication to face-to-face networking and community-specific action, there is an element to Alleycat Acres' approach, using modern media and taking what they can get to sustain the organization, which seems somehow more realistic in an increasingly connected city. Yet the somewhat less forgiving policies at SCF may be something that creates resonance with the people of Rainier Valley, and an important gesture in building positive relationships with the community. It is important to note that both SCF and Alleycat are very new and that while their beginning plans are telling of the ways in which organizers picture a successful organization, or a sustainable future, these ideas are just working models, and may evolve as the programs grow.

### **Other innovative projects**

With the 2010 City zoning changes which allowed for for-profit urban farming in any part of the city, a few creative interpretations of CSA urban farms have opened along with Alleycat Acres and SCF. Amaranth Urban Farm, located far south in the city where there is less density, opened following these zoning changes and has been a success for the first two CSA

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<sup>136</sup> Pudups's terminology.



seasons and is gearing up for the third.<sup>137</sup> Amaranth is solely a for-profit farm, not a community garden like the other examples discussed. For this reason, Amaranth does not do the outreach and volunteer projects like the others, although its website asserts that, “Urban farms are about people and a great many friends and family have pitched in with the work to get things off to a great start and to put their time and money where their values are.”<sup>138</sup> Amaranth Urban Farm is not accessible to all groups of people: it is not cheap to have a summer CSA subscription (a full season is \$728).<sup>139</sup> However, the focus on being human-scale (within the city, community-supported, grown by friends and family) is a welcome alternative from the very inhuman food system we now live within.

Another creative interpretation of urban agriculture is Magic Bean Farm, run by Josh Parkinson. He has built a network of vacant backyards in West Seattle, belonging to people with whom he found on a website called Urban Farm Share which connects would-be gardeners with vacant yards.<sup>140</sup> From this network of small gardens, he supplies a season’s worth of CSA for \$675 for a full subscription.<sup>141</sup> Again, this is not inexpensive, but the way in which he has creatively strung together bits of land shows the potential for these kinds of projects in cities (and the potential for backyard gardeners) on a very small, streetscape scale.

There are many more organizations cropping up to fulfill some niche-need in particular neighborhoods: City Fruit provides maps of fruit trees in the city and aids homeowners to care for their trees to produce good fruit, which they donate or otherwise find use for. Harvest Collective is an online network for backyard gardeners to sell their produce. There are

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<sup>137</sup> Vinh, Diana. "A Celebration at Amaranth Urban Farm." *Urban Farm Hub*. 29 Sept. 2010. Web. 25 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.urbanfarmhub.org/2010/09/a-celebration-at-amaranth-urban-farm/>>.

<sup>138</sup> "Our Story." *Amaranth Urban Farm*. Web. 28 Nov. 2011. <[http://www.amaranthurbanfarm.com/?page\\_id=17](http://www.amaranthurbanfarm.com/?page_id=17)>.

<sup>139</sup> "CSA." *Amaranth Urban Farm*. Web. 28 Nov. 2011. <[http://www.amaranthurbanfarm.com/?page\\_id=107](http://www.amaranthurbanfarm.com/?page_id=107)>.

<sup>140</sup> Falk, Tyler. "Seattle’s new urban-ag models are sprouting in friendly soil." *Grist*. 17 Aug. 2010. Web. 13 Nov. 2011.

<sup>141</sup> "Subscribe!" *Magic Bean Farm*. Web. 28 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.magicbean.org/csa/our-csa/subscribe/>>.

landscaping companies which will create edible gardens for homes and businesses (some with sliding-scale payment options, such as Cascadian Edible Landscapes).<sup>142</sup> There are a multitude of online resource networks to provide support for these budding organizations, as well as the older gardening standby organizations, such as Seattle Tilth Farm Incubator program, which provides training and support for new farms and farmers. A successful project has been the United People's Farm just outside of Seattle which is training recent immigrants farming and marketing skills – the program recently won a large grant from the USDA Beginning Rancher and Farmer Program.<sup>143</sup>

Although these are very diverse methods of working towards a more local food economy and food justice, these myriad organizations begin to fill the gaps in what needs to be done in a large, complex city. There are programs which cater specifically to low-income people or neighborhoods, groups which cater to immigrant populations, to people who want super-local produce delivered to their home and are able to pay, and people who do not want their backyard or old fruit trees to lie fallow but cannot maintain them on their own. Although they may not all be following the same formula for a 'successful project', or have the same focuses on social interactions, or the garden as public space as some of the larger organizations, they together creating a more viable alternative food system. The more of these organizations which exist and which provide opportunities for a larger public to engage with urban agriculture, local food and community gardening, the more that these sorts of organizations can approach a certain level of normalcy within the city – the less 'alternative' they become.

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<sup>142</sup> Falk, Tyler.

<sup>143</sup> "Seattle Tilth Receives USDA Funding for Small Business Training Program for Underserved Communities." *Seattle Tilth's United People's Farm*. 26 Oct. 2011. Web. 28 Nov. 2011. <<http://unitedpeoplesfarm.wordpress.com/>>.

## CONCLUSION

In the first two chapters of this thesis, I have focused on and scrutinized details of urban gardening organizations. Given the precedence that ‘community-building’ and ‘community-support’ have in the creation of these urban gardens and in the rhetoric surrounding urban gardening as a movement, it is important to remain critical of how these organizations work to fulfill these goals. Especially because these spaces are areas of potential empowerment, the results can be disempowering or exclusive if organizing towards social ends is done thoughtlessly or if the privilege of volunteerism is disregarded. That being said, of the laundry-list of potential positive outcomes of community gardens, if a few of the goals are accomplished then maybe that garden can be considered a success. Amber Banks said of Alleycat Acres’ work: “as long as we grow one thing and give it to one person, it’ll be a success.”<sup>144</sup> Although this statement is an exaggeration (there is a lot more going on ‘behind the scenes’ at Alleycat about processes of inclusion) this sentiment is important to keep in mind. These organizations cannot do everything, and if someone is growing food on a piece of vacant urban land, then that is likely a more productive use for that space than paving it. A garden will do more good for a neighborhood than remaining unused (or even developed, in certain cases). Garden organizers need to take into account provisions for positive social interactions in the garden, but if vegetables are being raised and people are eating better and locally, then it is a good use of space and energy.

In the day-to-day work that occurs in a garden, radical discussions about the larger purposes of the process of urban gardening do not necessarily need to occur (and the usually do not); in this case, the goodness comes from action. This is not to say that many of the new

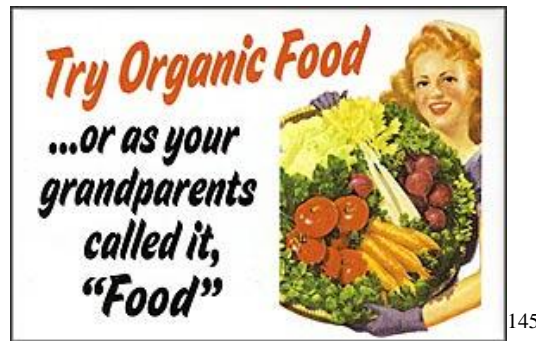
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<sup>144</sup> “Alleycat Amber.” *YouTube.com*. Weekday High, 3 July 2010. Web. 28 Nov. 2011. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=E\\_ThPfzt1oA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=E_ThPfzt1oA)>.

generations of urban gardens appearing prolifically in the Seattle area do not address the social aspects which I have shown that Marra Farm and the P-Patch Program actively seek to address, but that they are making their gardens simple, workable and potentially more accessible. There is a balance to be found because of the necessity of awareness of the social character of the garden, but maybe some of these gardens are just gardens; places for people to spend time and produce food. Engaging in ‘the big picture’ is important, but at the same time, simplicity in many ways accomplishes the same goals in the case of community gardens. The very act of gardening makes productive use of vacant land and begins to right wrongs in the food system. Multiple approaches by to urban agriculture by these many new organizations creates more potential good fits for the needs of more people, fills in the gaps of what was not being done before, and moves towards putting urban agriculture in a position of normalcy within Seattle’s urban food system.

My parents’ home in Seattle is located three blocks away from the house that my mother grew up in and where my grandparents still live. My parents didn’t necessarily intend to end up so ‘close to home,’ but they say it was a good house and a good price so they decided to buy it. As such, my mother has seen our neighborhood evolve over the last 50-odd years, having lived there nearly all her life. Our house is on two lots – we have our groomed, landscaped backyard and then beyond that is what we call the “back-backyard”: it’s like a wilderness back there, where my sister and I used to play lions in the tall, untamed grass. This unkemptness, fun as it was, is sort of a pity, for the lot is attached to our house because the former owners, the Menardis, used to be the neighborhood farmers. The entire back lot was cultivated and the family would sell the produce to the surrounding community. We still have all the old fruit trees, which are now getting old and unproductive, but the old beds are still there - just fallow. My mother and I have tried repeatedly to start afresh and grow food back there, but life always ends up

getting in the way. The point, however, is that the Menardis had a CSA before “CSA” meant anything – it was just a way to grow food. It probably was not even unconventional at the time, but it definitely was not a countercultural or an outwardly political act. It was simply a logical, local way of growing and distributing food, as well as making some additional income. As a model for an urban food system, this sort of set-up, and its modern equivalent in the form of Alleycat Acres, Magic Bean Farm or any of these other small, new organizations which use existing open land to grow food, is simple. The last forty-odd years have seen gardens come about as a form of social protest, and as part of larger movements, which has been necessary as far as establishing the importance urban gardening. But it is a positive sign that these new organizations can find multiple ways of expressing these same ideas, and not always in overtly political ways. They are gardening because it makes sense. Of course there are larger, more complicated issues behind the need for these gardens, but there is something to be said for the variety of forms that these urban agriculture organizations are taking as more and more people get interested and find a way to get involved. They do not all have to be working towards the exact same set of goals, but they can work together. This expansion and variety shows that urban gardening once more is becoming mainstream, much like the Seattle of decades past; this can only be a positive development.



<sup>145</sup> Courtesy of <<http://www.changingworld.com/catalog/images/5-TR.jpg>> Accessed 28 Nov. 2011.

## Conclusion

“May you live in interesting times” is said to be a blessing and a curse. Maybe every generation says this about their formative years, but it seems to me that the 2000s are definitely interesting times, and this is absolutely a blessing and a curse. It is scary knowing that I am graduating college into a world that is drastically different than the world that my parents graduated into: economically unstable, the climate on the brink of disaster, and it seems as though for the last two years some uprising or another has been on the front page. Times are changing. But I also see exciting possibilities in these changes: industrialization and the post-industrial world that has come out of it have defined human life for the last 150 or 200 years, but have really been more of a grand experiment with regards to the larger timeframe of human development. We have gotten ourselves into a mess, but we can get ourselves out of it, and it seems as though all of these small movements, such as urban gardening, and large movements, such as the Arab Spring, are examples of people waking up to realize that the status quo is not a given. This is where the blessing comes in: these are positive changes, and they are making the world a better, more equal place to live than it has been. Community gardens, as an example of a small movement, can appear quaint, simplistic, or too small to matter, but they are an example of how people can see a problem and proactively work towards social and environmental change. These gardeners are not waiting for someone to fix the problem for them, but are simply planting the seeds to cultivate the world that they want to live in.

### Measures of success

How these activists create these changes is what I have been investigating in this thesis. *How* do urban gardening organizations work to make to fulfill their goals and simultaneously work towards social change? Are communities receptive? How are all types of people included

in these gardens; how do these organizations work to provide open and inclusive access to these spaces? It feels a little simplistic to admit this, but what I have found is that success and specific methods are relative, situational and somewhat contingent. It a movement which is all about being 'local,' it should have been obvious that the methods to run a successful garden need to be specific to the locality as well: every community is different, and the same things will not work everywhere. That being said, there are some broader lessons that can be applied to community gardens in Seattle and elsewhere. First, the organizational methods need to work for that specific community. It sounds obvious, but especially when the gardens are organized and administered by an outside group, they must remain constantly critical of their methods, policies, outreach and structure so that they can be inclusive and generate goodwill in their neighborhoods. This is especially apparent in the work of Lettuce Link and the P-Patch program. Being larger organizations, they could have been in danger of instituting practices that were irrelevant in the communities that they worked in. However, as both organizations have evolved, they have remained flexible and adaptable to the needs of the neighborhoods; remaining critical of their past practices and doing what they can to address weaknesses. This has been a major reason why these two organizations have continued to grow and do good work over the past decades.

Second, policy matters. One factor in Seattle's success with urban gardening programs is that the city government has been supportive from the beginning—its governmental structure includes a community-garden department and since 1992 Seattle's master plan has indicated that urban gardens are an essential part of the community's many neighborhoods. The city, therefore, works to place at least one garden city-wide for every 2,500 people and design neighborhoods to include community gardens as a legitimate form of land use. The city's extensive support—bureaucratic, political, and financial--has allowed for more permanence of gardens within the P-

Patch program, and also has allowed for more flexibility for where and how these gardens operate. The changing of zoning laws (2010) has allowed for the explosion of new gardening organizations because now they can be built anywhere legally. Further, this law allows anyone to grow and sell food in any part of the city and on private property, which enables for-profit CSA gardens to begin operations. This in itself takes urban community gardens from being a voluntary past time into a serious addition to the city's food supply.<sup>146</sup> Now, people who are not gardeners or food bank clients can purchase food grown in the city, and urban farming can become a legitimate career. Andrea Petzel, an urban planner who works for the City notes:

Detroit's kind of famous right now for urban ag stuff, but they don't have the city codes to match up with that. And that's mostly what's happening in other cities...Seattle is one of the first cities to really look at their codes to try to match up with what the pressure is from the community.<sup>147</sup>

Many cities with some public interest in gardening would do well to look at the success Seattle is having with these organizations and find ways to mimic its achievements. While this policy change may not be feasible in every city, the immediate effect of this piece of legislation was as a boon to the urban-gardening scene in Seattle and likely would be elsewhere.

Third, community organizations should work to build partnerships between themselves and a larger network of garden organizations across the city. No single garden or group of organizers will be able to do everything themselves, nor can any single organization fulfill the many needs of a community (education, food donation, personal plots, CSA, etc). Robin DeCook explained the potentials and challenges of this network:

There's Seattle Tilth who's been doing garden education for many years... and the P-Patches and that was it on the urban gardening scene, [but]in the last two years it's really exploded in Seattle and in some ways... well it's really great that there's so much enthusiasm and there are so many people taking things in

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<sup>146</sup> Falk, Tyler. "Seattle's new urban-ag models are sprouting in friendly soil." *Grist* (17 Aug. 2010). *Grist.org*. Web. 13 Nov. 2011.

<sup>147</sup> Falk, Tyler.



different directions but it's also interesting to see that where we used to be able to get all the players in the room and get everyone to talk and figure things out and suddenly we've got a multitude of projects competing for the same pot of money and volunteer base, and it'll be interesting to watch how that plays out.<sup>148</sup>

More organizations can potentially create more problems if they are competitive, or if each feels they need to 'reinvent the wheel,' but if these organizations can communicate well and work together to accomplish larger goals then this influx of new garden programs should be a very positive evolution for the Seattle urban gardening movement. Alleycat Acres demonstrated well the potential for partnering with other organizations to reach out to a larger public by providing volunteer opportunities, food bank donations, and CSA delivery while their actual acreage and staff are small. In *Eaarth*, Bill McKibben argues the need for building networks and leaning on neighbors on this "tough new planet":

Across the country communities have begun to transform themselves... Often a farmers' market is the catalyst - not just because people find that they like local produce, but because they actually *meet each other* again... They [are] starting to rebuild the withered network that we call *community*.<sup>149</sup>

McKibben's ideas of building together with one's neighbors and community, of remaking our society in a sustainable way, means constructing these networks if not for our mental health, but because it simply *works* to collaborate with others on a local scale.<sup>150</sup> This is something that our food system has moved away from (by creating massive corporations which hold too much power) and urban networks of gardens move back towards placing value on collaboration and neighborliness in urban areas. This is how humans functioned for thousands of years, but this modern movement is not a rejection of all of the amazing developments we have made since industrialization, it is applying old ways of living simply and within our means to modern cities.

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<sup>148</sup> DeCook, Robin. "Marra Farm and Lettuce Link" Personal interview. 11 Aug. 2011

<sup>149</sup> McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. Times Books: 2010. 132- 139.

<sup>150</sup> McKibben. 132.

Part of what this means is using helpful technologies to make this job easier and more democratic than this localized lifestyle was pre-Industrial Revolution. As McKibben classifies how we will have to live in the future as returning to essentials—things that are concrete, tangible, simple, logical--rather than abstractions. Although the internet may seem abstract (who even knows what it really is?) he predicts, “And so we turn to the essentials of our future. In order: food, energy, and –yes- the Internet.”<sup>151</sup> The internet and social networks are a boon to organizing, sharing knowledge, and growing network in ways that are completely in line with ideas of increasing access to sustainable, equitable lifestyles. The internet is a helpful addition to organizations such as these, but it cannot do everything. As Ramesh Srinivasan, a UCLA professor of Media and Relation studies, illustrated at a debate on the role of the internet in the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements, it can organize, disseminate information, help inspire interest and support, but does not get people out of the house and into the streets (or gardens).<sup>152</sup> This is where the face-to-face interactions and localized community networks are most effective – especially in a movement which is essentially about localism; here is where people will lend a hand and get involved when they are aiding their neighborhood, their city, their emergency food system. The social networks and the internet cannot accomplish this on its own, but they can help to connect interested people and start dialogues, which support the physical spaces of the gardens. We have seen different perspectives on this from organizations in Seattle, such as Alleycat Acres which relies heavily on social networks, versus The P-Patch Program uses these sources only minimally. If these farms are to become a legitimate part of the food supply and accessible to everyone, however, I think that the internet will be need to be part of this effort.

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<sup>151</sup> McKibben, Bill. 150.

<sup>152</sup> Srinivasan, Ramesh. "#Revolution." Pomona Student Union, Claremont, CA. 16 Nov. 2011. Debate.

Fourth, garden organizations must do their best to remain critical and to use their flexibility to work towards creating the best alternative food and social paradigms that they can. In this thesis, I have not taken a firm stance on whether it is truly the responsibility of an urban garden organization to act consciously and actively towards making gardens a space that functions for *all* of the surrounding community. To what extent does an organization have to work to ensure that the users of a garden are representative of the surrounding community, or the city, as long as food is being produced? This is a nuanced issue, because on the one hand there are the arguments that if the people in a food desert are not actively involved in these garden projects then these organizations are disempowering and paternalistic, they create a kind of ‘charity-case’ situation where a garden is there where no one really wants it. On the other hand, is the argument that to expect someone who lives in a food desert to work even harder to grow their own food is equally problematic, as it is an unfair expectation that is not placed upon wealthy people. For the wealthy, gardening is voluntary, but poor people must empower themselves by growing their own food? As I discussed in chapter two, with a larger perspective on what “local” and “community” means, these two arguments can actually work together if we think of the communities supporting these gardens on a “zoomed out scale” of the city. Here, people from different neighborhoods, backgrounds, or income levels can garden side by side if they wish, but the essential part is that the garden organization needs to create a space which makes this a possibility. This could include adjusting times for work-parties, creating structural changes which provide greater incentive for volunteer work (eg. Seattle Community Farm’s work-trade policy) or however else they can ensure that they are providing avenues of access for as many people as possible. That is to say, garden organizations must work to be aware of structural impediments to inclusion for some people to work at a garden, as well as the privilege

of others to volunteer their time at a garden, both within their specific organization and in larger society so that they can work *within their means* to right these.

These gardens organizations are small-scale by nature and often have to make do with what they have to get work done. This includes financial resources, volunteer groups, schedules and availability of organizers, etc. However, these gardens are by their nature countercultural, and it is generally understood that in creating an alternative system for how people relate to food, these gardens are simultaneously creating opportunities to build communities of empowerment and leadership in a way that is equal, fair, logical and counter to the status quo. These organizations, and the urban gardening movement, are still in the beginning stages, so a focus on *process* is essential: while considering that sometimes the prolifically growing zucchinis just need to be harvested and it doesn't matter who does it, these organizations need to be deliberate about how this new alternative agriculture structure is going to be created so that we don't repeat the same mistakes we made in the past by haphazardly barreling forward.

### **What is really growing in these gardens?**

Urban gardens challenge many of the problems of conventional agriculture, both social and environmental, that are big, systematic and worldwide in scope. I realize that certain actions which are asked of community gardens are not asked of other organizations because they are too *big* to be adequately addressed. However, community gardening as a movement has a special advantage in that their focus on equality and sustainability are built into the very act of communal gardening in urban spaces. Gardening is a method of positive, proactive activism – gardeners do not have to wait for others (politicians, CEOs of corporations, fellow Seattleites) to agree or respond, but they can simply opt out of the conventional agriculture system and work to create the world that they want to live in.

As I write this, in the fall of 2011, the Occupy movements across the country have dominated the news. In many ways, these movements have been guided by the same ideas which have directed the ways I have been considering community gardening: the key word of the Occupy movement, “inequality,” is also the key term defining food-justice activism. The story of the financial collapse of Fall 2008 (due to unstable home loans and a dispersion of accountability in the finance sector) is reminiscent of the same problems that community garden organizations seek to address, albeit for a much more specific, smaller setting. Too much concentration of power in the hands of people who are not looking out for those who depend on them has had devastating effects on masses of people; too many people suffering from the runaway effects of abstractions that have little to do with (financial, social or ecological) reality – whether derivatives in the financial crisis or industrial agriculture. However, where the Occupy movement is a movement of rejection, urban agriculture is a movement of creation. As a demonstration of anger towards national inequalities and lack of representation, community gardens have the advantage of being able to build what they want democracy to look like, whereas the Occupy movements, in the position of (bravely) protesting against the very structure of our society, do not. They can resist, but not much else until more constructive ideas or movements emerge. This is not a criticism of the Occupy movement, but is just the nature of their big-picture protests.

Mark Bittman, New York Times food and opinion columnist explains this idea of overlapping goals succinctly: "What we need are more activists who are interested in food than ‘food activists.’ Whether we’re talking about food, politics, healthcare, housing, the environment, or banking, the big question remains the same: How do we bring about

fundamental change?”<sup>153</sup> This is an important point, and relevant in this discussion because when these community gardeners and garden organizers engage with large social problems, issues of inclusivity and equality in urban space as well as sustainability and food work, then they become ‘activists who are interested in food’ and can attract more support as well as begin to bring about more fundamental change which is what all of the diverse movements going on today are really trying to do. The difference is that in these gardens, activists and organizers can know they are working proactively towards these fundamental changes. The nature of the work makes it so.

Subtly, but importantly, a portion of the social changes that these community gardens can inspire comes from the fact that the garden is a leveling space. Connecting the dots between causes and responses, these food deserts are created by unequal policies and unequal cities which cater to wealth and whiteness. The favoring of ‘expertise’ in our culture has allowed us to prioritize certain types of knowledge and certain types of work over others, which can compound classism and inequalities. The jobs performed by people with less formal education are undervalued which only reinforces class divides in cities and accelerates issues such as lack of access to fresh food or education, because people with more social capital are better equipped to demand this of their government; education and wealth allow people to have more purchasing options and make better choices about food. Community gardens can act as spaces to correct the imbalances of these systems of privilege. Schukoske explains how the status quo of power and expertise is broken down and social capital is built in these dynamic spaces:

Community Gardens build social capital by not only reclaiming or preserving urban space, but also by fostering collaboration among nearby residents across racial and generational lines...The movement draws upon individual talents,

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<sup>153</sup> Bittman, Mark. "Finally Making Sense on Wall Street." Editorial. *The New York Times* 11 Oct. 2011. Web. 27 Nov. 2011.

knowledge and efforts, without such bars to participation as high cost, language barriers, or educational achievement, which may otherwise divide residents.”<sup>154</sup>

As Sue McGann emphasizes at Marra Farm, everyone eats food, so this work is relevant to everyone. The existence of these gardens in all types of neighborhoods helps to create or recreate connections between different people, as well as people and their environment, but another equally important aspect is that in gardening, walls between expertise and traditional knowledge are broken down. It doesn't matter where you are coming from or how you garden. This can be seen especially in P-Patches, where very different gardening styles may be seen alongside each other, but the important thing is that food is growing. People can share tips and help one another out, and in these situations, backgrounds which would usually segregate people into divergent lifestyles, do not preclude positive interactions and relationships.

Within a city, community gardens can serve as a sort of social laboratory of a more ideal way of urban life. Jeffrey Hou elucidates the social dynamics of expertise and representation in community gardens:

As user-initiated spaces, community gardens do not privilege professionals over non-professional. Rather they allow different knowledge and traditions to thrive and to influence the evolution of the space. As a result the gardens are often reflective of the cultural practices of the users.<sup>155</sup>

Creating these spaces which are accessible for their surrounding communities, which are receptive to the needs of a community and which attempt to right many of the societal problems that low-income communities have is essential work in a city. The existence of these democratic spaces can serve as a powerful counter to the status quo and an inspiration for further working to create more representative, responsive neighborhoods and cities.

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<sup>154</sup> Shukoske, Jane. "Community Development through Urban Gardening: State and Local Policies Transforming Urban Open Space." *Legislation and Public Policy* 3.351 (2000): 351-92. Web. 27 Nov. 2011.

<sup>155</sup> Hou, Jeffrey. *Greening Cities, Growing Communities*. Landscape Architecture Foundation, Washington D.C. 2010.

As the community garden movement is currently portrayed, it is still a “counterculture.” It is a growing counterculture, but it is still something that is “counter to” the norm, which is important to represent as an option, but it is not enough. Mark Bittman argues: “Countercultures and alternative systems can be nurturing, educational, illuminating, inspiring — and these are not small things — but they do not bring about fundamental change. Food co-ops, for example, make a difference, but they won’t much alter the way Big Food operates.”<sup>156</sup> The key for the urban gardening movement to move past being just an alternative is to continue to remain critical of their work and as universally accessible as possible, as well as building networks to fill in the gaps in the local food system. Seattle is well on the way to accomplishing these goals. Of course, as Sue McGann explained to Robin at Marra Farm, we will always have to think regionally, not everything can or should happen within the city, but we have to do the best we can to minimize the distance it travels and to maximize the positive ‘leveling’ effects of this network.

As scary as it is to face the unknown, I would rather that my generation and I be in this position than of following blindly in the footsteps of the last few decades which put us into this mess. It seems as though every day an op-ed seems to be telling me that the rules have changed, that the old road to success no longer so linear, and may not even arrive at ‘success’ in the end<sup>157</sup>. I say thank goodness, because maybe this means that the new road we will have to build will help us find lifestyles finally makes sense not just for ourselves but for the environment, the economy, and for all people. In taking a holistic perspective on food justice and urban sustainability, Seattle’s community garden organizations are taking critical steps towards creating this kinder and greener world. These ideas are already catching hold in national venues. For example in October 2011, *Sesame Street* announced that Lily, a new food insecure muppet

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<sup>156</sup> Bittman, Mark.

<sup>157</sup> Davidson, Adam. "The Dwindling Power of a College Degree." *New York Times*. 23 Nov. 2011. Web. 7 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/magazine/changing-rules-for-success.html>>.



will appear on the show when the muppets go to work together in a community garden.<sup>158</sup> This is a perfect example of community gardening being portrayed with representation of all of its participants, especially those most in need of it such as the food insecure children who watch *Sesame Street*. As long as the urban-gardening movement remains critical of its work and focused on including and representing those who have been systematically excluded from political or mainstream social participation in contemporary cities, this alternative network of gardens can become a greater part of the lives of Seattleites, maybe even a part of a *new*, equitable and holistic ‘normal.’

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<sup>158</sup> Jefferson, Whitney. "Meet Lily, Sesame Streets' New 'Food Insecure' Muppet." *Jezebel*. 4 Oct. 2011. Web. 6 Dec. 2011. <<http://jezebel.com/5846628/meet-lily-sesame-streets-new-food-insecure-muppet>>.

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