

The problems, promise and pragmatism of community food growing

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Abstract

Alongside associated forms of socially and politically conscious food production, community food growing is routinely connected to a wide range of social and environmental benefits. However, robust evidence in support of these associations remains scant, and while the conversation has shifted in recent years to take account of the sometimes unintended or negative aspects of these activities, no consensus has been reached about how such forms of food growing should adapt to new conditions, or be scaled up to maximize their positive impacts. A July 2016 conference was organized to address this strategic shortfall. This themed issue presents the papers resulting from the conference.

Keywords: Community food growing, community gardening, participatory action research, sustainable food systems, urban agriculture, urban agroecology, urban gardening

Introduction

As both long-term practitioners and researchers of community food growing (CFG), the authors of this introduction to this themed issue know first-hand the profound power of CFG. For many individuals involved in such initiatives, the same is no doubt true; the literature is full of compelling testimonial evidence and impressive arguments as to positive impacts such activities could have at a larger scale. That said, robust evidence in support of these strongly felt beliefs remains scant, and while the conversation has shifted in recent years to take account of the sometimes unintended or negative aspects of CFG, no consensus has been reached about how such forms of food growing should adapt to new conditions, or be scaled up to maximize their positive impacts.

Alongside associated forms of socially and politically conscious food production, CFG is routinely connected to a remarkably wide variety of issues. Even specific forms of CFG, such as community gardens, are talked about in terms of their multi-functionality: the American Community Garden Association, for example, suggest such spaces can provide ‘a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family food budgets,

conserving resources and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education’ (ACGA, 2018). However, finding ways to substantiate these ideas has proved difficult.

It was exactly this strategic uncertainty which created the impetus for a conference at the University of Warwick in July 2016 on Critical Foodscapes. When conceived, two main questions were felt to dominate theory and practice around CFG. The first was the matter of definition: *What do we mean by ‘community food growing’?* CFG is, quite deliberately, a broad term, intended to represent a wide variety of practices. As a result, CFG means different things depending on when and where one is situated (see Guitart et al., 2012). As has been noted, for example, disparities between approaches to CFG are particularly noticeable between the Global North and the Global South, where forms of collective food growing ‘are often not a choice; they are a means of survival’ (Opitz et al., 2016). However, this is far from being a hard and fast rule, as evidenced by community gardens in the USA, especially those intending to address food insecurity associated with food deserts (WinklerPrins, 2017).

Even when focused on the Global North, however, CFG can be protean in the extreme, where evidence is emerging of aspects of the approach being co-opted or adopted by less community-based institutions (Pudup,

2008). CFG also falls under and alongside other forms of food growing, which are not yet clearly defined; for example, peri-urban and urban agriculture (Opitz *et al.*, 2016), community-supported agriculture (Galt *et al.*, 2016), community gardens (Krasny and Tidball, 2016) and guerilla gardening (Finn, 2014).

CFG and associated forms of cultivation present a confoundingly complex and only partially mapped landscape of practices, meanings and forms. However, such definitional confusions—while frustrating—are crucial for those of us who wish to ask why and for whom such spaces exist. In this themed issue introduction, we pause to acknowledge the importance of such debates in the ongoing struggle to shape just and sustainable food systems, especially where they help identify new or previously submerged injustices. In the interests of clarity, however, we also move to identify a reflexively simple and provisional definition; that is, following Guitart *et al.*'s (2012) discussion, we understand the term 'community food growing' as denoting initiatives which are 'managed and operated by members of a local community in which food or flowers are cultivated' (p. 364). This definition is adopted here, not only because it draws on some of the most widely cited articles about CFG (Pudup, 2008; Kingsley *et al.*, 2009), but also because it is simple enough to capture the heterogeneous nature of practices in evidence, and explored at the conference.

The second question relates to how academics might best give CFG initiatives greater strength and visibility. A growing number of CFG initiatives are appearing, and academics, governments and non-governmental organizations alike are striving to make sense of and support them. Despite a long history of being understood as having straightforwardly positive political, social and environmental benefits, recent research on CFG initiatives has returned mixed results, with some outwardly pessimistic contributions—notably those suggesting complicity with the forces of neoliberalism (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Pudup, 2008). More ambivalent responses (e.g., McClintock, 2014 and Tornaghi, 2014) have tended to point out CFG's complicated entanglements in ostensibly contradictory politics, not least tensions between gardens' pedestrian or conformist aspects and their radical promise. Extremely useful and influential in this regard is McClintock's (2014) paper, which invites us to embrace such tensions, suggesting that 'coming to terms with its internal contradictions can help better position urban agriculture within a coordinated effort for structural change' (p. 149).

The papers cited above have been instrumental in signaling the need for more substantial efforts to build a robust evidence base and for academic insight to further strengthen the practice and influence of CFG. Not only have they been successful in highlighting a plethora of research gaps, but also the pervasiveness of unexamined assumptions and unconscious biases apparent in the

study and practice of CFG. The following section attempts to sketch out this recent research in more detail, as well as Critical Foodscapes position within this.

Recent research

The *Critical Foodscapes* themed issue comes at a time when CFG research has been developing and evolving rapidly, much like the practice itself. Several literature reviews have considered CFG in its various forms, including community gardens (Guitart *et al.*, 2012), urban agriculture in developed countries (Mok *et al.*, 2014) and urban home food gardens (Taylor and Lovell, 2014). Most of the literature about community gardens has considered those in 'low-income earning areas with different cultural backgrounds in industrial cities in the USA', reflecting a socio-political interest in these areas (Guitart *et al.*, 2012, p. 368). The gray literature offers a much more substantive focus on CFG in developing countries (i.e., FAO, 2007; World Bank, 2013). CFG has been considered by a variety of disciplines that have produced evidence of the range of benefits and motivations associated with these projects (Guitart *et al.*, 2012). These include community development and cohesion, mental and physical health benefits, education, economic benefits, and political and personal empowerment (see especially Jackson, 2017 *in this issue*). While positive environmental outcomes have been credited to community gardens, few of these claims are substantiated by studies from a natural sciences perspective or quantitative methodologies (Guitart *et al.*, 2012). Other gaps include impacts of urban sprawl on, understanding governmental support for, impacts of pollutants in, and the carbon footprint of urban food growing, as well as how urban food growing can contribute to the self-sufficiency of cities (Mok *et al.*, 2013).

Problematizing CFG

The positive potential for CFG is increasingly being problematized: examples include Guthman's (2008) description of community gardening as a vehicle to impose 'whitened cultural practices' on African American-inhabited neighborhoods (p. 431). McClintock (2014) has outlined the different paradigms through which stakeholders in urban agriculture engage with these initiatives and mapped some of the internal contradictions. There are also competing visions of what the purpose of CFG is, with a distinct divide between those who view it as a 'food-producing practice' (Tornaghi, 2017, p. 783) and those who feel 'the main benefits of urban cultivation are social' (Martin *et al.*, 2014, p. 752). This tension remains largely unresolved, both within and outside academia, and rather than needing resolution, might help to deepen our understanding of CFG as a site of ongoing contestation of meaning and practice (McClintock, 2014).

The value of CFG has also been problematized through work, which brings a local nuance to generalized claims for its beneficial impacts. For example, for those areas regarded as food deserts (Wang et al., 2014), and its influence on diet and nutrition (Castro et al., 2013; Grier et al., 2015), may be specific to certain local contexts, so not possible everywhere. Some articles in this themed issue extend the academic debate in this way: Bonow and Normark ([this issue](#)), provide insight into a Swedish case study, finding that CFG makes a limited contribution to Stockholm's vision of a 'sustainable city', while Jackson ([this issue](#)) explores the production of social capital in community gardens in one UK city.

Policy development

There is also an increasing interest in considering CFG in the more holistic context of city-region food systems (FAO and RUAFA, 2015) and integrating gardens within future urban planning and policy. For example, in 2015, 138 cities from all over the world signed up to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2015) to commit to improving urban food system governance in order to deliver socially and environmentally sustainable food systems. There has also been documentation of food practice in urban food policy (IPES, 2017), while speakers at *Critical Foodscapes* noted the rise of cities as a locus for strategies driving food system innovation (see Keech and Reed, [this issue](#)).

Following calls for policy development (e.g., van Veenhuizen and Danso, 2007), the need to manage the explosion of interest of CFG and to genuinely address issues of food insecurity through landscape-scale delivery (Smith et al., 2013), governments at all levels are developing policies to support its development (Jermé and Wakefield, 2013; Laycock, 2013) (see also the Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). These policies—or 'new political spaces' (Hajer, 2003)—are not particularly well researched, likely due to their informal nature (as in Laycock, 2013), or operation outside conventional policy frameworks (Cohen and Reynolds, 2014; Hardman and Larkham, 2014).

Environmental outcomes and quantification of outcomes

Following Guitart et al.'s (2012) calls to address a lack of empirical evidence of environmental outcomes in CFG, a number of scholars have attempted to redress the gap. Examples include work on soil contamination in community gardens (Bugdalski et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2014), biodiversity and ecosystem services (Orsini et al., 2014; Birkin and Goulson, 2015; Speak et al., 2015) and agrobiodiversity (Guitart et al., 2014). There has also been work to develop frameworks for measuring environmental outcomes, such as Farming Concrete's Data Collection Toolkit (Design Trust for Public Space, 2015)

for community gardens and farms and Goldstein et al.'s (2014) development of typologies of urban agriculture in order to quantify environmental 'footprints'.

In addition to these empirical works, reviews have considered the environmental outcomes of CFG. For example, Ferguson and Lovell (2014) reviewed academic and gray literature to explore permaculture as an agro-ecological practice, while Lin et al. (2015) focused on biodiversity and ecosystem services. There has been increasing effort to quantify other non-environmental outcomes of community gardens, such as the amount of money participants save on their food (Algert et al., 2014) and crop yields (Gittleman et al., 2012; CoDyre et al., 2015). One paper in this collection proposes an alternative form of Sustainability Impact Assessment applicable to community growing initiatives (Schmutz et al., [this issue](#)).

Participatory methodologies

Participatory approaches have long been used in studies of CFG; however, a much more diverse and creative set of methodologies and methods are now being adopted. These include Participatory Action Research (Bryant and Chahine, 2015; Marsh et al., 2017), youth peer interviews (Lile and Richards, 2016), citizen science (Birkin and Goulson, 2015), participatory mapping (Shillington, 2013), Photovoice (Boston et al., 2015; Harper and Afonso, 2016) and participatory video (Yap, 2017). These methods provide some of the most fertile terrains for not only filling many of CFG's 'research gaps', but for simultaneously building capacity and long-term resilience (People's Knowledge Collective, 2017). The extent to which these approaches are delivering genuine participation for community food growers could become one of the most important horizons for the future study of CFG.

Overview of the issue

As the above review indicates, a wealth of CFG activity is feeding a similar abundance of academic work, which increasingly draws out complexities and tensions, questioning what projects aspire to and can achieve. It was within this context that *Critical Foodscapes* was conceived, as a forum bringing together researchers, practitioners and many who straddle the two roles. The conference aimed for a critical approach to CFG, to bring to light often hidden problems, while aiming to remain constructive so as to generate solution-oriented discussion.

Articles in this issue criss-cross the terrain of these issues, and the globe, presenting a range of approaches to studying CFG. Two papers position CFG in relation to sustainability and consider the extent to which it advances sustainability. Bonow and Normark provide a case study of community gardening in Stockholm,

Sweden, in which they are critical of the degree to which present forms of CFG contribute to sustainability, suggesting that an instrumental approach to governance limits the projects' impacts and longevity. Schmutz *et al.* introduce Sustainability Impact Assessment as a tool to compare forms of short food supply chain, including home and community growing initiatives. Applying this tool to compare how producers and consumers in London perceive multiple dimensions of food sustainability reveals interesting contrasts between their perspectives. Also taking a UK perspective is the paper by Jackson which focuses on one pillar of sustainability: the social. Her case study of community gardens in Lincoln considers how they have contributed to building social capital locally and argues that the main asset of community gardening is its 'flexible and holistic approach' to community building.

The nature and form of spaces occupied and utilized by CFG initiatives is a theme across the remaining papers. Susan Haedicke describes what was on the surface an artistic project to beautify and enliven a neglected urban space in Paris. But, as she describes, the stories generated and exchanged by the Aroma Home project critique contemporary urban life and provide politically charged tales of how it could be different. Rebecca St. Claire and colleagues bring a temporal dimension to these spatial issues through focusing on a 'meanwhile' or temporary growing site. They suggest that such spaces offer multiple and diverse benefits, yet questions remain regarding the practicalities of urban sites which are only offered for CFG on a temporary basis. Virtual and networked spaces come to the fore as Dan Keech and Matt Reed consider online media as a central aspect of food activism in cities. Focusing on activists in Bristol, UK, they examine a variety of traditional and social media, identifying a clear divide between how movements represent themselves and how others portray their agenda, with implications which limit activists' power to influence. Finally, Rosenfeld and Kell explore food plants crossing global borders to live across time and space in the form of crops grown beyond the region where they were traditionally cultivated. They highlight a multitude of benefits growers obtain through cultivating exotic crops, and the need to provide support for continued cultivation by current and future generations in order to maintain important plant diversity adapted to local growing conditions.

Conclusion

One of the ironies of academic inquiry is that it tends to generate questions rather than resolving them—but we embrace this as part of the journey toward a reflexive politics. A theme shared by all the papers in this issue is the capacity of CFG initiatives to strengthen social and political networks and provide platforms to address shortfalls

in citizen participation in food system governance. In this regard, researchers are well placed to engage with CFG, using the wealth of participatory research methodologies available, especially those which valorize co-production of knowledge at all stages of the research design and implementation. This is an approach which is now widely called for in social science and agricultural research (IPES, 2016) but remains underdeveloped and underutilized.

The issues raised by *Critical Foodscapes* suggest the importance of taking a step back to consider the bigger picture context of CFG, and fundamental questions, not least what we as academics aim to achieve. Whatever the question in immediate view, the main challenges for future CFG research, we suggest, center on how the research itself can harmonize with the participatory and collaborative ethos embodied by the majority of CFG projects. The people-centered nature of CFG means that in order to support its progress, future academic work should begin with the intention of engaging participants as co-producers of knowledge.

In this respect, while *Critical Foodscapes* began looking for missing evidence for CFG's (often material) 'benefits', our principal reflections relate to CFGs as a powerful site of convergence for various movements aiming for social justice. To this end, CFG research must immediately cease to be yet another form of inquiry which is *done to* its participants; instead, it must continue to develop as a place of integration between the aims of researchers and practitioners. That is, to operationalize the ideal once espoused by indigenous activist Lilla Watson: 'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together' (quoted in Treviño and McCormack 2016).

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