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Food growing: building community and food resilience

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The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of the UK food system⁽¹⁾. Currently, 46% of fruit and vegetables are imported⁽¹⁾, making the UK vulnerable. Recent events such as war in Ukraine, volatile fuel prices and crop failures attributed to climate change have exacerbated this⁽¹⁾, with global food prices reflected in the cost-of-living crisis⁽²⁾. Food is not just a source of nutrition, but of personal and cultural identity⁽³⁾, with potential to impact on the extent to which people feel that they belong to a place or community. Community food growing schemes such as allotments remain popular in the UK⁽⁴⁾. They could increase food resilience and security through growing produce, otherwise imported. The impact of a community growing scheme based in south London was explored. The scheme, a small farm allotment, was established by a Hong Kong farmer to grow produce including traditional Asian vegetables. It also aims to encourage collective efforts e.g. co-farming, through use of shared and private spaces. Focusing on traditional Asian vegetables, it offers bespoke advice, support and education via workshops, online mentoring and traineeships.

Evaluation of this scheme was undertaken with ethics approval from Kingston University London. Using participatory non-extractive methods, qualitative and quantitative data were obtained using questionnaires and optional interviews with attendees of workshops (n = 52), online mentees (n = 2), and trainees (n = 3).

All participants described themselves as Asian, Chinese or Hongkongers. More than two thirds (69.1%) had been in the UK for a relatively short time (up to 24 months). Both experience of, and knowledge about, growing food were low amongst participants, although this varied by group. While none of the trainees had previous food growing experience, half of online mentees and more than quarter (26.9%) of workshop attendees had some. All of the online mentees and over half (53.8%) of workshop attendees described themselves as having some knowledge about growing food. The most common reasons given for their involvement were an interest in urban growing/agriculture and practical (rather than theoretical) skills acquisition. Asian vegetables had multiple meanings for participants. Most commonly, they related to aspects of home, demonstrating the importance of culturally specific foods in evoking memories of people, place and time. Asked whether taking part in growing could help them build a sense of belonging within the UK Hong Kong community, responses were almost entirely affirmative for a variety of reasons.

This highlights the multiple roles of food in people's lives, and the potential for food to be used as a bridge between different groups, and as a bridge between their original and current homes. It also emphasises the role that growing food could play in cultural identity and pride, potentially building belonging as well as food resilience.

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References

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