

**Cultivating Community and Identity:  
Urban Gardening in the Bhutanese-Nepali Refugee Community of Columbus, Ohio<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact that participating in community gardening has on the Bhutanese-Nepali refugee community of northeastern Columbus, Ohio. Studies have shown that gardening is correlated with mental wellbeing, low crime rates, and a strong sense of community, among other things. However, while many Bhutanese-Nepalis garden in American cities, the role of gardening and community gardening in these Bhutanese-Nepali communities has not been studied. Understanding why Bhutanese-Nepalis choose to garden in Columbus and the benefits that gardening can have for this growing immigrant population could contribute to knowledge of how to achieve an urban environment in which Bhutanese-Nepalis and other New American (immigrant) communities can thrive. This knowledge could be valuable in forming inclusive, effective policies that contribute to immigrants' success in Columbus. Columbus and Franklin County's Local Food Action Plan, which outlines goals for a sustainable local food system in Columbus and Franklin County, notes the need for policies that are inclusive of New Americans and other marginalized groups. This study could also be beneficial to local organizations that work with immigrants, and to other Columbus residents, as learning about how Bhutanese-Nepalis' feel about the significance of urban farming could lead to a better overall understanding of Bhutanese-Nepali refugees as a group within the Columbus community. Data for this study were collected through 20 interviews with Bhutanese-Nepali refugees who farm plots at two community garden sites in the Northland-Karl Road area of Columbus. Results of this study suggest that gardening benefits Bhutanese-Nepalis in Columbus by enabling them to hold onto a farming-based cultural identity, giving them access to foods used in traditional Nepali dishes, serving as an opportunity for people of all ages to socialize and pass on knowledge and skills to younger generations, and having positive effects on mental wellbeing, physical wellbeing, and the community's sense of togetherness.

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## Introduction

This research investigated the significance and benefits of community gardening among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees in northeastern Columbus. Bhutanese-Nepalis, or *Lhotshampas*, are a population of ethnic Nepalis who had lived in southern Bhutan for generations before being removed from Bhutan during the 1990s in a mass ethnic cleansing by the Bhutanese government. Since the 2000s, thousands of Bhutanese-Nepali refugees have resettled in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Columbus, Ohio has become home to one of the largest Bhutanese-Nepali populations outside of Bhutan (King, 2018).

In order to understand the circumstances under which Bhutanese-Nepalis came to Columbus, Ohio, it is necessary to briefly address the history of this group from when they lived in southern Bhutan and the events that led to their expulsion from the country and refugee status. This mass expulsion led to the 1990s Bhutanese refugee crisis, during which ethnic Nepalis (also called *Lhotshampas*, which translates to “people of the south”) were stripped of their citizenship by the government of Bhutan.

Ethnic Nepalis had begun settling in Bhutan in the 1800s when Nepali people were migrating to other South Asian countries for economic reasons (Dhungana, 2010). They were farmers whose descendants lived in southern Bhutan for generations, becoming the country’s main producers of food and contributing to prosperity for the region and the country (Dhungana, 2010). In 1958, the Bhutanese government formally granted citizenship and ownership of land to the Lhotshampas (Dhungana, 2010). This was done with the intention of integrating the Lhotshampas into mainstream Bhutanese culture (Dhungana, 2010; Kharat, 2001). However, the Lhotshampas continued to speak the Nepali language and to practice the Hindu religion and culture of their ancestors.

The following decades saw another influx of Nepali immigrants into southern Bhutan, again, largely for economic reasons (Kharat, 2001). This was accompanied by a growing fear among Bhutan’s *Drukpa* majority ethnic group—of which the country’s king and many elites

were members—that the Lhotshampas posed a threat to national security and national identity. This fear was reflected in a new citizenship act passed in 1985, which made several changes to the prior version of the act that had granted Lhotshampas citizenship in 1958 (Pokharel, 2004). These changes included requiring proof of a permanent place of residence in Bhutan during or before 1958, and fluency and literacy in the national language *Dzongkha* (which was not the first language of the Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas). In 1988, three years after the new citizenship act, a census was carried out only in the south of Bhutan, where Lhotshampas comprised most of the population (Dhungana, 2010). During the census government officials confiscated identity documents from those who could not prove citizenship under the new requirements (Dhungana, 2010). Those whom officials deemed unable to prove their citizenship were thereafter seen as “non-Bhutanese,” “infiltrators from other countries,” and “illegal immigrants” (Dhungana, 2010; Kharat, 2001).

Around this time Bhutan also implemented the “One Nation, One People” policy, which compelled all Bhutanese citizens to speak the Dzongka language, follow the religion (Buddhism), and conform to the traditional dress code of the Drukpa people (Kharat, 2001). The policy was protested by Lhotshampas, who were prevented from practicing their own religion and culture and speaking their own language. However, the message from the Bhutanese government was that all citizens must conform to the “One Nation, One People” policy to ensure that the distinct culture of Bhutan’s Drukpa majority would continue to exist and dominate (Kharat, 2001).

In an effort to prevent the Lhotshampa population from becoming a majority and overtaking the Drukpa national identity of Bhutan, the country forced many Lhotshampa citizens to leave through a process that included a series of human rights violations. Lhotshampas were deprived of access to education and jobs, and were beaten, threatened, tortured, imprisoned, or even killed if they protested the government’s policies (Dhungana, 2010; Kharat, 2001). Lhotshampa citizens were forced to sign “Voluntary Migration Forms” written in Dzongka, which

most Lhotshampas could not read (Kharat, 2001). By signing Voluntary Migration Forms Lhotshampas effectively gave up their citizenship in Bhutan and were forced out of the country.

While Bhutan and Nepal participated in years of negotiations in the hope of resolving the refugee crisis, displaced Bhutanese-Nepalis spent almost two decades inside refugee camps in eastern Nepal (Dhungana, 2010; UNHCR, 2006). In 2006 the US government promised to resettle 60,000 Bhutanese-Nepali refugees and other developed countries including Norway, Denmark, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand followed suit (Dhungana, 2010).

Between 2008 and 2020, the United States had resettled over 96,000 Bhutanese refugees, almost 10,000 of whom were resettled in Ohio (Refugee Processing Center, 2020). Between 2002 and 2014, Bhutanese refugees experienced the second-highest growth of any refugee population in Franklin County. They comprised 16.8% of the refugees that resettled in the county during that time period (Cook et al., 2015). Recent estimates of the Bhutanese-Nepali population in Columbus point to between 15,000 (Ferenchik & Pyle, 2015; Parks, 2015), and around 20,000 (Carson, 2018; Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS), n.d.; Sumner, 2020), making them the city's second-largest refugee population (Sumner, 2020).

Bhutanese-Nepali refugees and other immigrant groups have been reported to garden and farm in Columbus and elsewhere in Ohio, including Cleveland (Sterpka, 2009), Akron, and Reynoldsburg. The Westerville, Ohio city council have dedicated two acres of land specifically for refugees to farm—one acre for Bhutanese-Nepalis and one acre for Somali Bantu refugees.<sup>2</sup> Some refugees have already begun farming on a large scale by purchasing or renting land in places such as Reynoldsburg, Grove City, and Akron. By growing their own fresh food, refugees who are gardening (small plots) and farming (commercially) are taking actions that align with the recommendations of the Local Food Action Plan (LFAP), which outlines goals and action steps to create a sustainable and just local food system in Columbus and Franklin County (City of

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<sup>2</sup> This information is based on conversations with ETSS staff.

Columbus & Franklin County Ohio, 2016). The Northland area, where this study took place, is even a specific target within the LFAP. Relevant recommended action steps in the Plan include:

- Recommended Action B-5: “Grow capacity and enhance viability of civic agriculture to allow more residents to grow food for themselves and their neighbors.”
- Recommended Action B-10: “Engage those most impacted by health disparities, including low-income, African American, Hispanic, New American and other underrepresented communities in developing and implementing culturally appropriate food assistance education, nutrition, gardening and cooking programs.”
- Recommended Action C-8: “Develop central food marketplaces that reflect the culture and diversity of neighborhoods.”

The objectives of this research were to identify major reasons that Bhutanese-Nepali refugees in Columbus choose to garden and to understand the benefits of urban community gardening to New Americans like Columbus’ Bhutanese-Nepali community. Through examining perceived benefits to Bhutanese-Nepali refugees of community gardening programs in the Northland area of Columbus, these gardening programs can be viewed in the context of the Local Food Action Plan as a small part of how Franklin County residents engage in growing and consuming food.

### **Literature Review**

Literature on the effects of various urban community gardening models on non-refugee populations suggests that gardens provide a host of benefits. Narrative accounts of community gardens document that they increase access to fresh, healthy food and can improve nutritional levels (Hynes, 1996; McKinley & Weller, 2014). Interviews with 178 gardeners in the Newark, New Jersey area revealed that 44.4% of participants benefited from gardening by improved access to fresh vegetables and 35.2% benefited from improved diets (Patel, 1991). Often, the goal of community gardens is not only to grow food to supplement residents’ diets, but also to



improve the social environment for people of all ages (Severson, 1987 as cited in Kurtz, 2001; Riddell, 1993). Gardens provide a space for people to build relationships with each other, with nature, and with their neighborhoods (Kurtz, 2001). Exposure to recreational green space in urban areas has been associated with a sense of healthfulness among community members (Francis & Hester, 1987), less procrastination on the part of public housing residents in dealing with major issues (Kuo, 2001), and lower crime rates (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). Another study of 144 gardeners and 67 non-gardeners in Pennsylvania found that the gardeners were more active than the non-gardeners in community projects and reported higher levels of life satisfaction (Blair et al., 1991). Twenty-six percent of urban gardeners in Patel's 1991 study reported feeling personal satisfaction and an increase in wellbeing because of gardening. Additional positive outcomes correlated with urban and community gardening include, by some accounts, spending channeled into the local economy to buy food grown in urban gardens and farms, knowledge and skills gained and passed on (often to children) by the farmers (Keller, 1994; McKinley & Weller, 2014), and a reduction in carbon emissions due to having less food transported over long distances (McKinley & Weller, 2014).

Growing food in community gardens (and in some cases on one's own land) is a common activity among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees, both in Columbus and in other places to which they have relocated. One reason for this may be that refugee resettlement agencies throughout the US "use community gardens to promote psychological healing, self-sufficiency, community engagement, and a return of human dignity" (Gerber et al., 2017, p. 19). According to various news reports Bhutanese-Nepali refugee populations garden in several US cities including Akron, Ohio (Schultze, 2017), Charlottesville, Virginia (Soh, 2016), Louisville, Kentucky (Bhutan News Service, 2016), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (O'Callaghan, 2017), St. Louis, Missouri (Petrin, 2018), and Syracuse, New York (Klein et al., 2014). Bhutanese-Nepalis are accustomed to a culture of strong community and social support and value family, sharing,

and working for the betterment of the community (Dutton, 2011). Community gardening exemplifies this.

Despite the apparent prevalence of community gardening among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees who have relocated to the US, few studies focusing on this topic have been published. The studies that have focused on community gardening among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees have revealed a correlation between participation in community gardening and social and physical benefits. Gerber et al.'s 2017 study, conducted in Texas, compared Bhutanese-Nepali refugees who gardened in community gardens with Bhutanese-Nepali refugees who did not garden. Results showed that gardening provided the refugees with opportunities to build new networks for social support, learn how to access social services, engage with other community members, and reconnect with cultural roots. Bhutanese-Nepali refugees who gardened also reported higher levels of confidence in “advocating for themselves in a work context, communicating with a child’s school, or attending medical appointments independently,” whereas Bhutanese-Nepali refugees who were non-gardeners struggled more and experienced more barriers in the transition to life in the US. That is, the social support experienced by gardeners served as a resource for adjustment during this transition. The study also found that participants expressed a desire for more opportunities for elderly or disabled individuals to participate in activities that could help support their families while promoting their individual wellbeing; these could include gardening larger areas of land (Gerber et al., 2017).

Another study published in 2016 by Hartwig & Mason used focus groups and survey data to evaluate the benefits of a community gardening project serving Bhutanese-Nepali and Karen<sup>3</sup> refugees in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. The gardeners who participated in this study spoke about community gardens as a place to socialize and work together. In focus group discussions many gardeners mentioned physical benefits such as getting exercise and that they

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<sup>3</sup> One of the largest ethnic minorities in Myanmar.

valued that the vegetables they grew were “chemically free” (grown without pesticides). Survey data revealed that 78% of participants reported increased vegetable intake over the course of the growing season (Hartwig & Mason, 2016). Stories shared by participants in the same study revealed that gardening was a way for some refugees to connect with their cultural identities.

Aside from the studies by Gerber et al. and Hartwig & Mason, no known academic research focusing on Bhutanese-Nepali refugees’ gardening has been published. However, the findings of these studies bear similarities to those of other studies on gardening and community gardening among immigrants and refugees. In a case study of African humanitarian migrants who tended community garden plots in Australia, Harris et al. (2014) noted that “community food gardens offer a tangible means for African refugees, and other vulnerable or marginalized populations, to build community and community connections” (p. 9202).

Community gardening had a particular significance for the refugees interviewed by Harris et al. because they were able to reconnect with their family and community background, express their cultural identities, and use skills learned in their countries of origin to help adapt to life in their new country. Ho (2010) also described the activity of gardening as helping to maintain a sense of cultural identity and providing “continuity across countries and periods” in the lives of Chinese immigrants to New Zealand (p. 791). Both studies noted that gardening (Ho) and community gardening (Harris et al.) appeared to help immigrants feel connected to their countries of origin while helping them adapt to their new lives, similar to the way community gardening seemed to provide Bhutanese-Nepali refugees with a connection to their cultural identities and an opportunity to build social support networks (Gerber et al., 2017; Hartwig & Mason, 2016).

As mentioned, few studies examining community gardening among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees have been published. No known studies have focused primarily on the role of community gardening in preserving Bhutanese-Nepali cultural identity in the US and none have investigated gardening or community gardening among the Bhutanese-Nepali refugee

community in Ohio. This is particularly significant as according to the Columbus Dispatch central Ohio alone is home to an estimated 30,000 Bhutanese-Nepalis as of 2019 (Michael), one of the largest populations of Bhutanese-Nepalis outside of Bhutan (King, 2018). This thesis research sought to address the gaps in the previous literature by providing insight into the practice of community gardening within the Columbus Bhutanese-Nepali community. By using a qualitative approach to investigate the questions of why Bhutanese-Nepali refugees practice community gardening in Columbus and what benefits community gardening provides them with, this thesis adds to the existing bodies of work on community gardening within refugee populations in general and specifically among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees. The results of this study support the ideas suggested by previous studies that participation in community gardening can provide social support (Kurtz, 2001) and can enable refugees to connect with and retain their cultural identities (Gerber et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2014; Hartwig & Mason, 2016; Ho, 2010).

### **Research Design and Methods**

Semi-structured interviews with 20 Bhutanese-Nepali refugee gardeners were conducted at two garden sites during the summer of 2019. In the Northland area of Columbus along Karl Road, three community gardens were considered as potential research sites. One of the three gardens was very small and neither gardeners nor growing crops were observed there during several visits.<sup>4</sup> Due to apparent low activity in this garden it was not selected as a research site. Active gardening was observed at two community gardens—identified as Garden A and Garden B for the purpose of the research project—and these gardens served as the locations for participant recruitment and interviews. Participants were selected from the population of adult Bhutanese-Nepali refugees who maintained at least one plot in Garden A, Garden B, or both gardens.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2018 (the year prior to conducting research), the advisor to this project (Cathy Rakowski) visited this garden and observed 12-14 plots. In 2019, prior to conducting the research, 8 plots were observed in this garden.

Prior to the recruitment of participants, the research team made several visits to Garden A and the adjacent office of Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services (ETSS), a central Ohio nonprofit that provides programs for immigrants and refugees from various countries.<sup>5</sup> During these visits, the team cultivated relationships with staff members at this ETSS branch office and gathered information on the local Bhutanese-Nepali community and their involvement in gardening. Upon learning about some of the challenges gardeners faced, such as getting access to particular seed varieties common in Bhutan and keeping animals out of the garden, the research team provided ETSS with gifts (i.e. the seeds of a South Asian hot pepper used for medicinal purposes, which gardeners had been searching for, and garlic-based repellants to keep deer and rabbits away from the garden). The ETSS director distributed the gifts among the gardeners. Throughout the research process the importance of working in conjunction with the ETSS staff was clear as they worked closely with the Bhutanese-Nepali community and were themselves Bhutanese-Nepali refugees. ETSS staff members' input and assistance were sought in order to conduct interviews in a manner respectful to the community.<sup>6</sup>

The 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with one interviewee at a time and with the help of two ETSS staff members<sup>7</sup> who took turns recruiting participants to be interviewed and interpreting between Nepali and English during the interview. Following the ETSS staff member's introduction of the researcher and research project to each participant, each participant was given a copy of the IRB-approved informed consent form in English, and the form was orally translated into Nepali by an ETSS staff member. Participants signed the informed consent forms and gave their oral consent to participate. Although most participants

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<sup>5</sup> ETSS is a community based 501(c)(3) organization that helps new arrivals from all countries establish roots and gain self-sufficiency in Central Ohio through programs and services that encourage community integration, sustained employment, education, health, and strong families (Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> The ETSS staff who assisted with this project were three Bhutanese-Nepali staff members located at the branch office adjacent to Garden A.

<sup>7</sup> Two ETSS staff members assisted with participant recruitment and Nepali/English interpretation. They were asked to help because of their familiarity with the Bhutanese-Nepali community where interviewees were recruited, and they were compensated for their time at a rate comparable to that of a professional interpreter.

were unable to read in either Nepali or English, the informed consent form was later translated into Nepali by another ETSS employee and a copy of the Nepali version of the consent form was provided to each participant to keep for their records, and to be read to them by a family member or community member if needed. Identifying information of participants and their transcribed interviews were kept confidential. All ETSS employees who helped with participant recruitment, translation and interpretation were compensated by the research team for their time. Each interviewee was given a gardening tool of their choice as compensation.

Interviews followed a 20-question questionnaire designed to gather qualitative data with a focus on participants' past and present experiences of farming and/or gardening, reasons for gardening, and benefits and drawbacks related to gardening in the community gardens. The goal during interviews was to follow the questionnaire as closely as possible for purposes of comparison. However, the open-ended nature of many of the questions led to interviews taking different conversational paths. Unscripted follow-up questions were sometimes used to learn more about information that came up during interviews.

Interviews were recorded using a digital audio-recorder and later transcribed by the researcher. Instead of linking the recordings or transcriptions of interviews to respondents' names, each interviewee was given a number. The interviews were analyzed subsequently to identify the major themes related to why gardening is a significant practice among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees in northeastern Columbus and how gardening impacts their quality of life. With a focus on responses to the question "why do you farm<sup>8</sup>?" key words or phrases were identified and coded based on the main ideas of each response. Based on common characteristics among the coded responses, the codes were reorganized into four major themes described in the Results and Discussion section: (1) retaining cultural identity as farmers, (2) growing

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the interviews, the word "farm" was used and understood by the interviewer and interpreter (and presumably by participants) to mean "to grow food" whether on a farm or in a garden. It was later determined that "garden" was a better term to describe the practice of growing food in community gardens when communicating with a wider non-refugee audience.

culturally relevant foods, (3) exercise and physical health, and (4) gardening as a family and community activity. The remaining data from interviews was used to provide additional context about participants' practice of community gardening.

### **The Gardens**

According to ETSS staff the majority of gardeners in both Garden A and Garden B were Bhutanese-Nepali refugees. Each garden was partially supported by a church located at its respective site. The churches provided land, water, and sometimes supplies such as manure and seeds to the gardeners. Each garden had at least one container that collected rainwater to be used for watering the plants. Based on interview responses and observations of the two gardens, varieties of food grown in the gardens included beans, potatoes, *sag* (a South Asian broad-leaf spinach), mustard leaf, pumpkins or squash, okra, radishes, parsley, tomatoes, salad greens, chili peppers (including South Asian and US varieties), cilantro, carrots, cauliflower, bitter melon, cucumbers, ginger, onions, and mint. It is worth noting that participants may have mentioned only the foods they were growing during the months when interviews were conducted (June and July). On visits to the gardens after interviews concluded, corn (a variety from southeast Asia) was observed to be growing on several plots; however, no participants mentioned in interviews that they grew corn.

#### Garden A

Garden A was the larger of the two gardens and several times the size of Garden B. Garden A featured 125 plots (not all plots were active at the time of the study). Gardeners paid an annual fee of \$20 per plot to secure their space. Plots were assigned on a first come first served basis each year, so having a plot one year would not guarantee access to a plot the next

year.<sup>9</sup> There were two large rainwater collection tanks at Garden A, provided by the church that offered its land to be used for the garden plots. The church also provided fencing to keep deer and rabbits out of gardeners' plots. Some participants expressed that there was not always sufficient water provided by the rainwater collection tanks, however, and that they sometimes relied on water the church brought in from an outside source or water that they brought from their homes. Eighteen interviews were conducted at Garden A.

### Garden B

Garden B was the smaller of the two gardens, featuring approximately 20 plots. Gardeners paid an annual fee of \$25 per plot to secure their space. The church at Garden B provided a smaller rainwater collection tank than those at Garden A and provided wooden beams to demarcate each plot. Corn was less prevalent in Garden B than in Garden A; not every gardener in Garden B grew corn, although nearly every gardener in Garden A did. Flowers, including edible flowers, were grown in Garden B. Garden B was on sloped land and gardeners experienced a problem with water pooling in the lower part of the garden. Plots located at a lower elevation often flooded, which caused many crops planted there to die. The pooled water either drowned the plants or was heated on sunny days to a temperature hot enough to kill the plants, according to participants. Two interviews were conducted at Garden B.

## **Participants**

Twenty Bhutanese-Nepali refugees were interviewed. On days when the researcher visited the gardens to conduct interviews, potential interviewees were identified by an ETSS staff member who recruited them for an interview. The interview sample consisted of 12 men and 8 women. The ages of respondents ranged from 22 to 71, with the median age at 56. At the

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<sup>9</sup> This may have been the case at Garden B as well; however, specific information on the way plots were assigned at Garden B was not volunteered by interviewees.



time of the interviews, participants had been living in the US for between 1.5 and 10 years, for an average of 6 years.<sup>10</sup> For 13 respondents, Columbus was the first place they had been settled in the US. Six respondents reported having paid employment; the jobs mentioned included as an employee at Saraga International Market, a teacher, a warehouse worker, two pickers and packers at a food products company, and a night shift worker at a plastic company. Participants' demographic information is provided in **Table 1** below.

**Table 1: Participant Demographic Information**

<b>Frequencies</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	12 (60)
Female	8 (40)
<b>Employment status</b>	
Paid employment	6 (30)
No paid employment	14 (70)
<b>Places lived in USA</b>	
<u>Relocated directly to Columbus</u>	13 (65)
<u>Relocated to one other place, then Columbus</u>	6 (30)
Arizona	1 (5)
New Jersey	1 (5)
Syracuse, New York	1 (5)
Akron, Ohio area	1 (5)
Dallas, Texas	2 (10)
<u>Relocated to two other places, then Columbus</u>	1 (5)
Lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; then Virginia	

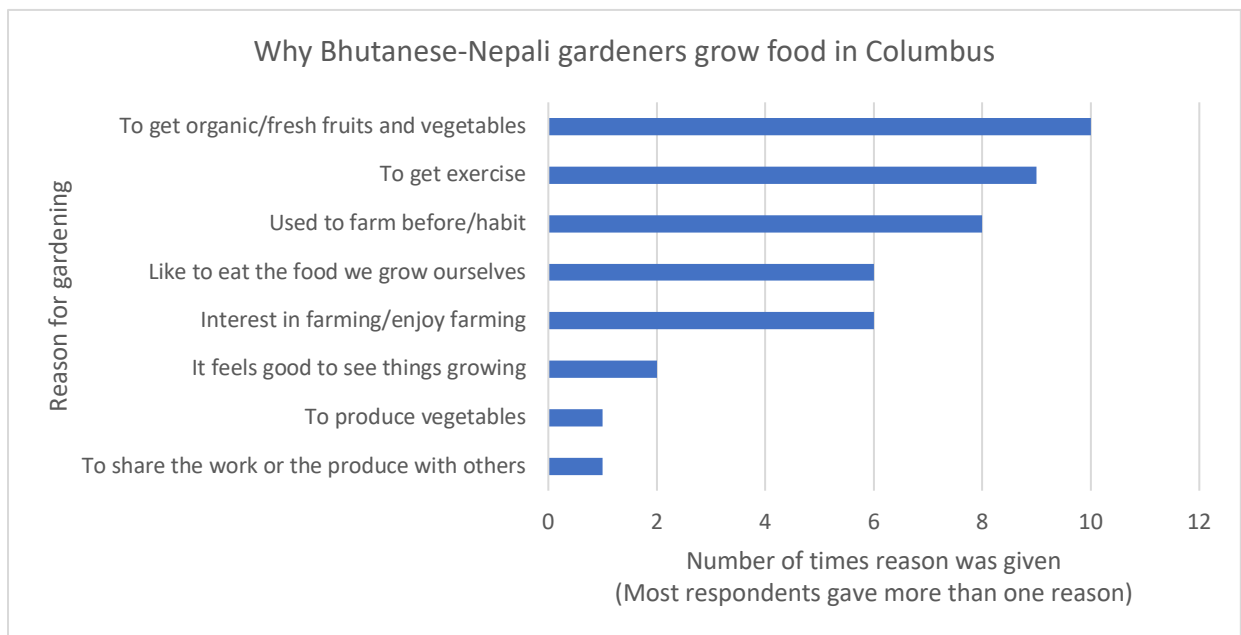
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<sup>10</sup> For one participant, information about the number of years lived in the US at the time of the interview was not collected. He was a Bhutanese-Nepali refugee and the teacher who ran a program in Garden A for students. His interview did not follow the questionnaire used in other interviews; he was asked questions specifically pertaining to the student program.

## Results and Discussion

Responses to each interview question were coded based on the main ideas in each response using an inductive coding method and the codes were recorded in a spreadsheet. In order to determine themes relating to why community gardening is important to the study population and the impacts of working in the gardens on the study population's day-to-day life, patterns among the identified codes were examined. Eight codes (detailed in **Figure 1** below) were created to describe the reasons participants most frequently identified for gardening in the community gardens. By examining trends in coded responses to this question and others throughout the interview, four major themes were identified to describe the perceived benefits of participating in community gardening. The four major themes are described in sections 1-4 below **Figure 1**. Section 5 describes additional benefits of community gardening that emerged in interviews less frequently than the major themes.

**Figure 1: Why Bhutanese-Nepali gardeners grow food in Columbus.** Responses are arranged from most-frequently-given to least-frequently-given.



## 1. Retaining cultural identity as farmers

This theme emerged as a pattern as participants described their past experiences with growing food as a deep-rooted practice within their families or in connection with their cultural background. Farming or being part of a farming family long before starting to garden in Columbus was a universal experience among participants. Participants' responses were coded based on whether or not they had farmed before moving to Columbus, whether or not they reported growing food while in a refugee camp, whether or not they had farmed in another US city before moving to Columbus, and whether or not they expected to be able to continue to grow food when they moved to Columbus. Responses were also coded for having expressed a connection between growing food and identity.

All participants had farmed before moving to Columbus with the exception of a 22-year-old woman who had been too young to participate in farming with her family when she lived in Bhutan and in a refugee camp in Nepal. All nineteen of the older respondents had farmed in Bhutan. Those respondents who mentioned the amount of land they used to farm in Bhutan had farmed anywhere from 3 to 11 acres. The larger land areas allowed the farmers to grow different varieties of crops than they could grow in their garden plots in Columbus. One man described the 11-acre farm he had worked in Bhutan, on which he had grown rice, corn, ginger, and oranges. He had also raised cattle and poultry in Bhutan. With the exception of corn and ginger, the crops he grew in Columbus were not well-suited to the size constraints of an urban community garden. While he reported growing a variety of crops (okra, bitter melon, pumpkin, carrots, sag, beans, salad, tomatoes, and cucumbers) in his six community garden plots between Garden A and Garden B, he did not mention growing any of the same crops he had grown on his farm in Bhutan.

Thirteen participants mentioned having grown food while living in refugee camps.<sup>11</sup> Growing food in refugee camps was primarily associated with having a kitchen garden in the camp, or by sharecropping with native Nepalis in a village outside of the camp. Besides growing food for their own families' consumption, there was other involvement in the agriculture sector among Bhutanese-Nepali refugees living in the camps. One woman said that while she had not grown food herself while living in the camp, she had a business selling produce brought in from outside the camp. The interpreter explained that in addition to cultivating some food through kitchen gardens or sharecropping, refugees would travel in and out of the camps for agricultural work: "Every day, 3,000-4,000 people would go from the camp to the nearby [farms] for work and [come back] in the evening... People [harvested] rice, wheat, and corn in the [farms]. And they would be paid. That is... how we survived."

Four participants also said that they had farmed or done agricultural work at another site in the US before coming to Columbus. One man described working for a chicken company in Lancaster, Pennsylvania for over three years. Two more participants mentioned having grown food at a garden area that was far from their respective homes in Dallas. Both of these participants mentioned that the distance from their homes to their garden plots near Dallas had made it challenging to tend to their plots regularly. The first noted that it had taken an hour to get to his plot by car; the second simply said that his plot had been small and far away (from his home). A fourth respondent mentioned "[planting] something once or twice" in a garden in Syracuse connected to an English-as-a-Second-Language program that he had participated in. However, he had not farmed his own plot in this garden and had gardened there infrequently.

When asked about their expectations before moving to Columbus, five participants stated that they had expected or hoped that they would be able to farm or grow food in the city. Fourteen had not expected that they would be able to grow food in Columbus. "We did not know

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<sup>11</sup> The actual number of participants who had grown food while living in refugee camps could be higher, as participants were not directly prompted to say whether they had grown food in the camps.

what kind of place it was,” one woman explained. Another woman remembered speculation on the part of refugees in the camp where she had lived in Nepal: “They said, in America you will not see land. You will not see the soil...” Sometimes, participants were alerted by family or friends that there were opportunities to garden. “When my mother and father came (to America) first, when we talked, they said ‘We have a garden,’ so I felt so happy that... I could also (garden)...”<sup>12</sup>

In general, participants’ cultural identities as farmers were evidenced by the fact that growing food had been part of their lives for decades. Several responses were identified as linking farming or growing food to participants’ cultural identities, including responses to “Why do you farm?” that were coded as “used to farm before/habit,” and “like to eat the food we grow ourselves.” When asked why they gardened in Columbus<sup>13</sup>, eight participants mentioned that one reason they gardened was because they used to grow food in Bhutan and in refugee camps in Nepal. Six participants mentioned the reason of liking to eat the food they grew themselves.<sup>14</sup> As one participant said, “In Bhutan we don’t have any other alternative because we are the farmers.” Both in Bhutan and in refugee camps in Nepal, growing food was necessary for survival.

Another participant spoke of happy memories of farming: “I remember the farm there in Bhutan. [Gardening] here, I will reconnect with the farm, reconnect those memories of the past in Bhutan... that makes me happy... when I sow the seeds, I want to see the plants germinating and growing.” These responses validate the idea that farming is a significant part of Bhutanese-Nepali refugees’ personal and cultural identities as a people whose livelihood was historically

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<sup>12</sup> Some gardeners had come to Columbus from other states to join family members and because of the garden areas that awaited them.

<sup>13</sup> Since food was readily available from nearby grocery stores, and participants likely had a source of income from their own job or from a family member.

<sup>14</sup> Participants may have meant that they liked to eat the varieties of foods they chose to grow and/or that they liked other aspects of eating the food they grew themselves, such as feeling that they grew the food independently or feeling that the food they grew was better than food they could buy.

earned through farming. Another way that gardening served to preserve Bhutanese-Nepali refugees' cultural identity was by enabling them to access culturally relevant foods. Culturally relevant foods grown in the gardens are discussed in detail in the next section.

## 2. Growing culturally relevant foods

This theme emerged as a pattern as participants reported cooking Nepali dishes with the food they grew or growing South Asian crop varieties. Responses were coded based on whether or not a participant reported cooking Nepali dishes and based on which crop varieties they reported growing.

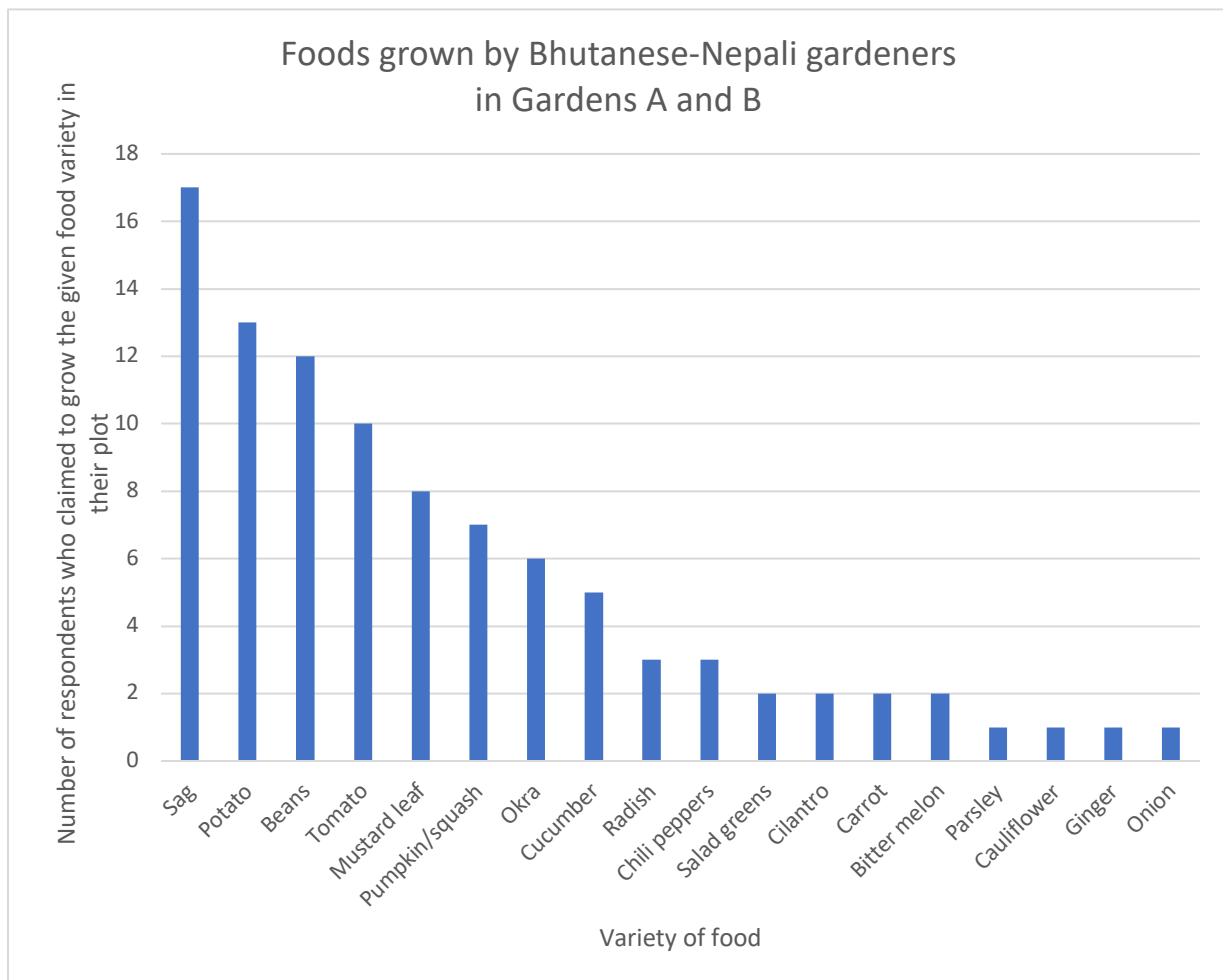
Cultivating plots in community gardens was a way for participants to grow some varieties of vegetables common in Bhutan and Nepal, which they used to cook Nepali dishes. Most participants cultivated a combination of crops common in Bhutan and Nepal and crops common in the United States (as well as crops of which similar varieties are grown in all three countries). Two South Asian crops were mentioned frequently: *sag* (South Asian broad-leaf spinach) and mustard leaf. Another crop grown by some participants was a South Asian chili pepper.<sup>15</sup> An ETSS staff member explained that the corn grown by refugees was a variety grown in Asia, taller than the sweet corn grown in the US. The crops grown that were not specific to South Asia included potatoes, beans, tomatoes, squash, okra, cucumbers, radishes, salad greens, cilantro, carrots, bitter melon, parsley, cauliflower, ginger, and onions. Both the South Asian and North American crop varieties were used by participants to cook Nepali dishes, including curries, soups, greens, lentil dishes (*dal*), and *gundruk* (a soup made of preserved, fermented mustard leaf). Gundruk is a traditional dish that was labeled by participants as one of the national dishes of Nepal. Many participants would dry and ferment the mustard leaf they grew in their plots to save it for winter to be made into gundruk.

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<sup>15</sup> It was not clear which specific variety of chili pepper interviewees were discussing.

**Figure 2** below shows how many of the participants reported growing each crop in their plots. (As noted in the description of the gardens, participants may have only mentioned the crops they were currently growing at the time of the interviews in June and July). Food varieties are organized from most commonly grown to least commonly grown, based on the number of interview respondents who stated that they grew each food.

**Figure 2: Foods grown by Bhutanese-Nepali gardeners in Gardens A and B.** Sag and mustard leaf were among the top five responses and both South Asian crop varieties.



### 3. Food, physical health, and exercise

The codes “to get organic/fresh fruits and vegetables” and “to get exercise” (displayed in **Figure 1**) were grouped into the theme “food, physical health, and exercise” because the majority of participants expressed their beliefs that gardening contributed to their health in at least one of two ways: (1) by providing access to fresh or organic produce, and (2) by providing an opportunity for exercise. Specifically, ten participants said they gardened to get organic or fresh fruits and vegetables. In the words of one 65-year-old man referring to the produce he grew, “I feel very happy when we eat green vegetables. It is very good for our health, and we get good vitamins from these green vegetables. It is better to eat green vegetables rather than meat.” A 52-year-old woman also spoke of how growing her own fresh produce made her feel more satisfied than buying vegetables from a store: “When I eat the green, fresh vegetables, I feel so, so good. The ones that I produce are without utilizing fertilizer. There’s no fertilizer [so] it is organic. And that has a different taste than if I bring it from the store.”

Some participants described the amount of physical labor their lifestyle in Bhutan had consisted of, which contrasted with their current, sedentary lifestyle in Columbus. In one interview a 56-year-old grandmother proclaimed, “We used to do a lot of work in Bhutan [and] Nepal, big areas, so this is nothing for us.” Many others expressed that since moving to the US they did not have access to another form of exercise besides working in their garden plots. The following are selected comments from participants that highlight the differences between lifestyles and their relation to health before and after relocating to the US.

*“In Bhutan, we had cows and ox and we had lots of cow dung, manure... we used to carry around big loads of manure [on our backs], and I used to put all this manure on the field... and then we plow the field, then we plant all these vegetables and fruits.” –Man, Age 44, living in US for eight years*



*“I feel satisfaction; I feel happy when I work in the field, that I get enough exercise, and when we work in the field, we feel hungry, we eat nicely, we eat food enough so (that we) get enough energy also. But back in Bhutan we [had] to work here and there, carry the load and so many things... I [had] to get 50 to 40 kg of load and walk up and down in the hills. But here we do not have any exercise. Whatever we go to we drive a car, so we do not have enough exercise. That is the good thing [about working] in the field.” –Man, Age 60, living in US for eight years*

*“If there were no gardening, if there were no farming, maybe I would be sleeping at home and then disease would have attacked me. So it is very good for me.” –Man, Age 63, living in US for nine years*

4. Gardening as a family and community activity: sharing work and harvested produce, socializing, teaching skills to younger generations

Participant responses were coded based on whether they worked in their plots with family members and friends, whether they shared the produce they harvested, whether they mentioned socializing in the gardens, and whether they reported teaching their children or grandchildren to grow food. Positive responses in these categories were grouped into one theme, “gardening as a community activity,” because they highlighted the social and communal nature of community gardening.

Seventeen of the twenty participants said that they gardened with other members of their families—spouses, siblings, children, and grandchildren—or with friends at least some of the time. Three respondents reported gardening primarily by themselves, but sometimes with other family members. In addition to working on plots shared with family members, the small size of plots and their proximity to one another allowed gardeners to work alongside and build relationships with non-relatives in the community (often other Bhutanese-Nepali refugees, as

they represented the majority of gardeners at both Garden A and Garden B). Not only was work in the garden an activity shared with other community members, participants also noted that they shared the produce from their plots with neighbors, family, and friends. A 60-year-old male gardener explained, "Some they do not have enough money or enough food and they are our family and friends; I like to share the food." Another participant focused on sharing the work of gardening and sharing the produce harvested as primary reasons for gardening. Sharing seeds to plant in the gardens was even reported between different states. A 56-year-old female gardener said, "We also get (seeds) from friends. Sometimes somebody will bring seeds from Kentucky, some from New Hampshire, some from North Carolina."

Several participants said they taught their children or grandchildren how to grow food in the gardens. While most of the gardeners interviewed were in their 50s or 60s, the gardens still served as an intergenerational space where skills learned by older farmers in Bhutan could be passed down to children too young to remember their parents' and grandparents' homeland. In fact, three plots in Garden A were allotted to a program to teach students at a nearby elementary school about gardening.

##### 5. Additional benefits of community gardening

Several participants noted that gardening enabled them to save money that otherwise would have gone toward purchasing food. A 52-year-old woman gardener commented, "[since] I started doing the farming here, I have not bought any of the green vegetables. So that saves me a lot." A 48-year-old woman mentioned that her family "may not have money all the time so getting a meal from the farm will meet need in an emergency."

One participant specifically mentioned stress relief as a benefit of gardening: "Since I have been farming, I get refreshed when I do the work and if I stay without work in the home I have tension, so that has minimized the tension, doing work here. If I stay home, I have more tasks, stress."

## Conclusion

Through qualitative analysis of participants' feelings about and experiences of gardening, the findings of this thesis suggest that gardening provides opportunities for Bhutanese-Nepali refugees to connect with a farming-based cultural identity, to access culturally relevant foods, to exercise and improve their health, and to socialize with other community members. By providing insight into the practice of community gardening within the Columbus Bhutanese-Nepali community, this research addressed the lack of previous literature focusing on community gardening among this particular refugee group. While building on previous literature on community gardening, the results of this study echo past findings that suggest perceived benefits of community gardening include social support (Kurtz, 2001), increased intake of fresh fruits and vegetables, and connection with immigrants' and refugees' cultural identities (Ho, 2010; Harris et al., 2014; Hartwig & Mason, 2016; and Gerber et al., 2017).

While this study was limited to the sample size of 20 participants, the interview responses provided a look at how some Bhutanese-Nepali refugees perceive the social and physical benefits of their participation in community gardening. The community gardening programs in the Northland area of Columbus appear to align with the recommended actions B-5 ("Grow capacity and enhance viability of civic agriculture to allow more residents to grow food for themselves and their neighbors") and B-10 ("Engage those most impacted by health disparities, including low-income, African American, Hispanic, New American and other underrepresented communities in developing and implementing culturally appropriate food assistance, education, nutrition, gardening and cooking programs") (City of Columbus & Franklin County Ohio, 2016). Future studies that investigate the topics brought up by participants in this thesis research (i.e. the potential nutritional benefits to these gardeners of increased fruit and vegetable consumption from the gardens, or the relationship between social networks and community gardening) would be helpful to contextualize the results of this study.

## Appendix A

### Questionnaire Used in Interviews

*Italicized questions* were eventually removed from the questionnaire after consistent similar responses by participants.

1. Record gender
2. Record age
3. Do you work outside the home? If so, what is your occupation?
4. How long have you lived in Columbus?
5. When did you immigrate to the United States?
6. Please describe your experiences with farming before moving to Columbus.
7. Was farming a factor you considered before deciding to move to Columbus (if they moved here from another city)?
8. Why do you farm?
  - a. Passing down knowledge to younger generations?
  - b. To continue a cultural practice?
  - c. Other ....
9. Do you have family members here in Ohio who also farm? Do they farm with you?
10. Do you know other members of the Bhutanese-Nepali community who would like to farm but are unable to farm?
11. *What obstacles prevent some community members from farming?*
12. What foods do you grow?
13. Where do you get the seeds from?
14. How do you water your plants or do you depend on rain? (If water plants) Where does the water come from that you use?
15. Do you use manure or fertilizer? If yes, where do you get it from? If no, why not?

16. What do you do with the food that you grow? For example...

- a. Do you grow food only for your own family's consumption?
- b. What dishes do you cook from the food that you grow? Are they Nepali dishes?
- c. Does farming help you save money (that might otherwise be spent buying food)?
- d. *Do you sell produce from your garden and/or cooked dishes made from produce from your garden?*
- e. *Do you participate in a "farmer's market" to sell produce? If not, how do you sell it?*
- f. *(If don't sell produce) Are you interested in selling food produced in/from your garden?*
- g. Are you interested in growing *larger* quantities of food in order to earn (more) money from farming?
- h. *Does anything prevent you from selling food that you grow in your garden?*

17. Aside from producing food to eat or to sell, how does farming impact your life?

- a. Example: How does farming make you feel? (happy, tired...)
- b. Example: Is your day-to-day life improved because you farm? In what way?
- c. Are there other ways in which farming impacts your life either in a good way or in a problematic way?

18. Are you satisfied with the size and characteristics of the plot that you farm? If not, what kind of plot would you want to be able to farm on? Why?

19. Are there any problems that affect your plot and what you are growing? If yes, what are those problems?

## Appendix B

### Photos of Gardens A & B



Plots in Garden A



Plots in Garden B



Rainwater collection in Garden B

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