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The Perceptions of Community Gardeners at Jones Valley Urban Farm and the Implications for Dietary Interventions

Matthew D. Northrop
Tulane University, mnorthro@tulane.edu

Brooks C. Wingo
University of Alabama, bcwingo@uab.edu

Jamy D. Ard
Wake Forest University, jard@wakehealth.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the reasons community gardeners at Jones Valley Urban Farm in Birmingham, Alabama participate in the community garden program, as well as to explore the potential impacts such participation has on the members' health, community, and diet. Twenty active gardeners participated in four focus groups. Gardeners reported prior experience, cost savings, taste, sustainability issues, and provision of fresh and organic food as reasons for participating. Gardeners also reported issues related to sharing, community development, mental health, personal pride, perceived health benefits, and new - found food variety as impacts of their participation. Finding s from this study will hopefully serve to guide future quantitative research evaluating community gardening as a potentially healthful dietary intervention.

Keywords

Community Gardening, Urban Farming, Dietary Interventions

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Matthew D. Northrop
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana USA

Brooks C. Wingo
University of Alabama, Birmingham, Alabama USA

Jamy D. Ard
Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, North Carolina USA

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Introduction

In recent years, community gardening has become a research interest because of its potential as a health intervention. Although published research investigating the efficacy of community gardening in this capacity is relatively scarce, several recent studies suggest it may have promise. A survey of upstate New York community garden coordinators reported that in addition to issues such as community empowerment and development, health issues ranked as the most common reasons for gardener participation (Armstrong, 2000). A study investigating community gardeners in Toronto provided similar results; in focus groups and individual interviews, community gardeners perceived such programs as providing health benefits (Wakefield, Yeudall, Taron, Reynolds, & Skinner, 2007).

One specific way community gardening may impact the overall health of participants is through diet, particularly its effects on fruit and vegetable consumption. Several studies have suggested that community gardening may increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables and improved nutrition (Armstrong, 2000; Wakefield et al., 2007). Additionally, one study suggested that Flint, Michigan residents with a household member who participated in a community garden were 3.5 times more likely to consume five vegetables per day than those who did not have a family member participating in a community garden (Alaimo, Packnett, Miles, & Kruger, 2008).

A substantial body of research suggests an increase in fruit and vegetable intake may be important for several reasons. Some research suggests that an increased intake of such foods may help prevent and treat several diseases and risk factors. An analysis of approximately 200 studies showed a statistically significant relationship between increased

vegetable intake and a protective effect for a variety of cancers (Block, Patterson, & Subar, 1992). There is also evidence that increased fruit and vegetable intake may help prevent cardiovascular disease (Ness & Powles, 1997). Additionally, an analysis of several clinical intervention studies suggested that advising an increase in fruit and vegetable intake, when coupled with advice on decreasing energy intake, could be an effective form of weight management (Rolls, Ello-Martin, & Tohill, 2004). Increased fruit and vegetable intake may be especially important given the increase in obesity over the past two decades among the US population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1985-2007) and its spectrum of known health consequences (National Institutes of Health & National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Obesity Education Initiative, 1998).

With these issues in mind, the purpose of this study was to investigate two principal matters. Firstly, this study was intended to examine the reasons gardeners participate in the Gardens of Park Place community garden at Jones Valley Urban Farm in downtown Birmingham, Alabama, and whether these reasons were similar or dissimilar to reasons for community gardener participation in programs already studied elsewhere in North America. Secondly, this study was intended to explore the perceived impacts community gardening has on gardeners' overall health, community, and particularly, diet.

This research is significant for several reasons. As mentioned earlier, published articles regarding the perceived health benefits of community gardening—especially its effects on fruit and vegetable intake—are scant. Secondly, studies of community gardening have been conducted in locations such as Toronto, upstate New York and Flint, Michigan, but to the best of our knowledge none have looked at an urban community garden in the southeastern United States. Finally, only a few of the aforementioned studies address the dietary effects of community gardening.

Methods

Jones Valley Urban Farm and the Gardens of Park Place

In order to best understand the context of this study and the people involved, it is necessary to understand the Gardens of Park Place within the framework of its parent organization, Jones Valley Urban Farm. Jones Valley Urban Farm is a non-profit organization with a vision of being a "model sustainable urban farm that teaches youth and the Birmingham community about sustainable agriculture and nutrition through outdoor experiential education" (Jones Valley Urban Farm, n.d.). Jones Valley Urban Farm has two main organic production farms, the produce from which is sold through local farmer's markets, restaurants, grocery stores and vegetable box subscriptions. In addition to the main production farms, Jones Valley Urban Farm is also involved in education programs for school children and adults, as well as being involved with local policy-making groups that address issues ranging from increasing local food sustainability to addressing childhood obesity.

Jones Valley Urban Farm also helps manage several community gardens, one of which is the Gardens of Park Place located on the same block as its downtown farm. The gardens occupy one corner of the property and consist of several four by eight foot plots (there was a total of 37 plots, as well as a significant waiting list, at the time the focus groups were conducted during June of 2009). Jones Valley Urban Farm provides all the materials needed to maintain a garden, including tools, seeds, and water. In return, gardeners are required to pay a yearly rental fee and expected to adhere to the same organic and sustainable growing practices used on the farm. Additionally, Jones Valley Urban Farm staff members organize regular meetings for the community gardeners designed to teach them pertinent skills ranging from gardening methods to food preservation techniques. Participation in the

community gardens is not limited to those who live in the immediate vicinity, and many of the gardeners actually reside in several neighborhoods in and around Birmingham. Compared to other community gardens that tend to have members from a particular community, the Gardens of Park Place may be considered to have a relatively wider range of people with in terms of ethnicity, education and income.

Investigators

The principal investigator (MDN) served as the primary coordinator of this research project. This included focus group design, implementation and moderation, in addition to coordinating and performing the subsequent data analysis. The co-investigators (JDA and BCW) primarily advised on study design including focus group organization and development of the question route. One co-investigator (JDA) also participated in the data analysis as described below.

Participants

Participants in this study had to be currently active in the Gardens of Park Place community garden program at Jones Valley Urban Farm and be at least 19 years of age. The Gardens of Park Place community garden coordinator provided the investigator with contact information (telephone numbers and/or email addresses) for 35 gardeners participating in the program at the time this study was conducted. Additionally, the investigator posted flyers around the community garden and Jones Valley Urban Farm property in order to spur interest. The investigator successfully made contact with 26 of the 35 for which contact information was provided. Contact was also made with three gardeners who shared plots with primary plot holders, but for whom contact information was not available. These individuals were contacted either in person at the Jones Valley Urban Farm property or through gardeners for which contact information was provided.

Of the 29 individuals contacted, two declined participation. For the remaining number, their eligibility was confirmed and focus group meetings were arranged to best match participants' availabilities in order to maximize attendance. Seven interested participants did not attend the focus groups, presumably due to scheduling conflicts. The final sample consisted of 20 participants (53% of the known 38 active gardeners). Of these, 14 fully completed a demographic questionnaire.

Results from the demographic questionnaire are shown in Table 1. Of the 14 participants that completed the demographic questionnaire, the majority where Caucasian (78.6%) and female (71.4%), and half had participated in the community garden for less than six months. Regarding age, education and income, the distribution was relatively broader. With respect to age, the largest fraction (35.7%) was age 41-50 years. With respect to completed education, the largest fraction (35.71%) had finished post-graduate work or a professional degree. With respect to annual household income, the largest fraction (28.6%) earned $0-15,000.

This project was approved by the UAB Institutional Review Board prior to recruitment. Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to their participation.

Table 1: Gardener Demographics (n=14)

Gender (% female)	71.4
Ethnicity (%)	
Caucasian	78.6
African American	21.4
Age (%)	
21-30 years	14.3
31-40 years	21.4
41-50 years	35.7
51-60 years	14.3
61-70 years	0
71-80 years	14.3
Education (%)	
8th grade or less	0
Some high school, but did not finish	7.14
Graduated high school or GED	21.4(3)
Vocation, trade or technical school	14.2(9)
Started college	14.2(9)
Graduated college	7.14
Started post graduate work	0
Finished post graduate work or professional degree	35.7(1)
Annual household income (%)	
$0-15,000	28.6
$15,001 - 30,000	14.3
$30,001 - 45,000	14.3
$45,001 - 60,000	7.1
$60,001 - 75,000	21.4
$75,001 and up	14.3
Length of participation in community garden (%)	
<6 months	50
6 months – 1 year	14.3
1-2 years	21.4
>2 years	14.3

Focus Groups

The design and implementation of the focus groups followed the methods suggested by Krueger and Casey (2000) To best accommodate the purpose of this study and the resources available (such as participants' availabilities, total number of participants, time allotted for research), it was decided that data gathered from the participants would be pooled into a single group rather than multiple subgroups. This design provided flexibility for participants by allowing individuals to attend whichever group was most convenient. This encouraged participation, which helped optimize the total number of focus groups as well as the number of participants within each focus group. Each focus group had 5-7 participants and lasted approximately 40-50 minutes. A total of four groups were conducted.

The moderator (MDN) began each focus group with a brief summary of the study's purpose and explanation of the participants' role. The moderator then proceeded with the question route developed by the principal investigator and a co-investigator (JDA). This route followed a progression from general opening and introductory questions to more focused key questions. The questions were intentionally open-ended to spur group conversation on the topics of interest, mainly the reasons for perceived impacts of community gardening on diet, health, and community (Table 2). Prior to the focus groups being conducted, the question route was tested with the Jones Valley Urban Farm director, farm manager and community garden coordinator for relevance and clarity when spoken.

Table 2: Focus Group Question Route

Opening:	1. Tell us your name and how long you have been gardening at the Gardens of Park Place at Jones Valley Urban Farm.
Introductory Question:	2. How did you learn about the Gardens of Park Place and Jones Valley Urban Farm?
Transition Question:	3. Think back to when you first started gardening at the gardens. What were your reasons for beginning?
Key Questions:	4. In what ways do you feel community gardening could have an impact on your health?
	5. In what ways do you feel community gardening could have an impact on what you eat?
	6. In what ways do you feel community gardening could have an impact on your community?
Closing:	7. Of all the impacts we have discussed, which one is most important to you?
	8. (After reading a brief summary of the discussion of key questions) Did I correctly describe what we discussed?
	9. (After reading an overview of the study's purpose) Have we missed anything? Is there anything you would like to say that you did not get a chance to say?

Analysis

Each focus group was digitally recorded using a handheld recording device and transcribed verbatim by the principal investigator. These transcriptions were the data that underwent analysis. The principal investigator adopted the "long-table approach" as defined by Krueger and Casey (2000). This method involved clustering quotes from the transcriptions into groups that answered the key questions from the question route. Quotes were then further subdivided into themes within each question and, in some cases, among multiple questions. For example, the quotes "it's just relaxing," "it is therapy," and "it's a release" were first identified as perceived impacts of participation. They were then sub-grouped together because the investigator felt they shared a common theme, which was eventually labeled "mental benefits." This process was undertaken independently by both the principal investigator and co-investigator (JDA), after which a common list of themes was generated. This list served to guide the formation and organization of the results.

Results

The themes generated during the analysis were organized around the two primary questions driving this study: (a) The gardeners' reasons for participation, and (b) the gardeners' perceptions of impacts resulting from community gardening. Therefore, the discussion of these themes will fall along these lines. Quotes from the transcripts are included to better illustrate the themes by presenting the thoughts and opinions of the gardeners verbatim.

Reasons for Participation

Prior experience. Several gardeners expressed having some sort of prior experience with gardening. Some gardeners spoke of being exposed to gardening at an early age by close relatives or community members, and some specifically identified themselves as having a rural farm upbringing. For many of these gardeners, the community garden provided a place to partake in a familiar activity. This was particularly important to those that lived in the downtown area that did not otherwise have access to land for gardening.

Provision of fresh and organic food. Many of the gardeners spoke of the garden as a means of procuring fresh and organic foods. For some, their plots provided alternatives for certain store-bought goods where one could "harvest what's ready" and not "have to worry about going to the store and buying it." For some gardeners, gardening was viewed as a way of obtaining certain types of produce not commonly found in stores such as heirloom tomatoes and certain types of squash. Many gardeners also questioned the quality of store-bought produce and valued the access to fresh vegetables provided by their gardens:

> For me it's just access to what I know to be fresh. I don't know how old any of that stuff is in the store other than visually. But when I come down here to work and pick something and bring it home, that's fresh, do you know what I mean, I just know that because I'm directly involved in it.

Cost saving. Several gardeners specifically expressed a desire to save money by growing their own vegetables. One gardener even described buying vegetables from a grocery store as a "struggle." The majority, however, were specifically interested with gardening as a cheaper alternative to store-bought organic produce. Several gardeners perceived store-bought organic goods as high-priced and spoke of participation in the community garden as an affordable means of obtaining organic foods that did not "cost an arm and three legs." Additionally, gardeners spoke of the community garden as a place to grow particular types of produce, such as red bell peppers, that were costly if bought from a grocery store.

Taste. Gardeners spoke of the produce grown in their plots as having a particular taste that, for many, was a "good motivator to get out and grow your own food." Certain garden-grown vegetables were valued over their store-bought counterparts for their flavor. One gardener mentioned that one could "tell a difference between a home-grown tomato and one that's mass produced," a view echoed by many other participants.

Personal and communal subsistence and sustainability. Many gardeners valued the community garden as a means of preserving horticultural knowledge and first-hand experience with food production. One gardener noted that "we were just…one generation away from the plow when everybody had a garden, and that knowledge is lost." This particular interest was echoed by many gardeners in the form of unease with large-scale food production. Such a concern existed because of a perceived lack of organic and sustainable

growing techniques on the part of large agro-business, as well as an apprehension for the potential social and ethical ramifications due to the lack of such practices:

> You know, you don't really know what's in your food if you buy it at just the grocery store. You don't know…if they were unsustainable practices but also people involved who weren't paid well…there are a lot of things that could happen…

These gardeners' interest in such issues was ultimately reflective of the general perception of the community garden as one component of Jones Valley Urban Farm, rather than a separate entity. For these gardeners, participation in the community garden was a means of supporting the greater mission of Jones Valley Urban Farm. This was made especially evident by those who spoke of participating in the community garden in order to spread knowledge about such issues "beyond the garden."

Perceived Impacts

Sharing. Gardeners spoke prominently of sharing as an important impact of community gardening on its members. This concept permeated the group discussions in several ways. Many spoke of sharing in terms of exchange of gardening knowledge between gardeners:

> You know, everyone comes in with…some degree of knowledge great or small, but it there's a lot of talking between plots and offering advice…

There also existed the physical sharing of plants and produce. Several gardeners mentioned giving or exchanging goods among each other. Finally, many spoke of the sharing of labor. Gardeners reported providing and receiving help with garden chores such as watering. Such acts of sharing were viewed as positive consequences and reinforcement of the social aspect of community gardening.

Community development. The "community" aspect of community gardening was particularly valued by the garden's members and presented in multiple ways. Many valued the social environment created by the community garden and the interpersonal relationships that inevitably formed between gardeners. Many gardeners also mentioned the diversity created by the gardens; having gardeners from a variety of different backgrounds, socioeconomic groups and locations within the city was generally viewed in a positive light. In addition, gardeners spoke of the perceived impacts on children. Gardening was perceived as a constructive and educational activity for the youth that were involved in the community garden and volunteered at Jones Valley Urban Farm.

The community garden was also considered by many to be an aesthetic element for the greater downtown community. In particular, the garden, and Jones Valley Urban Farm overall, were viewed as a positive use of space by providing and preserving an outdoor area for local residents within downtown Birmingham.

Mental benefits. With many different words, gardeners reported mental health benefits of gardening as a significant personal impact. The act of gardening was described as a stress-relieving activity that provided **"**a release" and served as a form of "therapy." In addition, the environment of the community garden and the rest of the Jones Valley Urban Farm property were viewed as having a relaxing quality.

Personal pride. Many gardeners reported gardening as a personally rewarding experience. Gardeners took pride in their work; a productive garden was greatly valued as a personal accomplishment:

> when I tasted the fruit of my labor…you couldn't have told me that there was any other thing that tasted any better.

Health benefits of homegrown vegetables. Many gardeners viewed their garden-grown produce as being healthier and more nutritious that the store-bought equivalents. For these participants, there was doubt regarding the quality of store-bought produce and a sense that their garden-grown vegetables were healthier because it did not "have those pesticides and chemicals on it." For many participants, this value for growing organic not only applied to their personal wellbeing, but was also regarded as having positive environmental impacts. Additionally, many perceived their personally grown produce as fresher, and therefore healthier, than store-bought produce.

New-found food variety. Several gardeners reported that participation in the community garden affected the variety of their diets by increasing their exposure to new and different types of vegetables in their gardens and, eventually, kitchens. This exposure to new types of foods came as a result of information and plant exchanges between fellow gardeners, Jones Valley Urban Farm staff, and organized community garden meetings. In addition to an increased exposure and consumption of new vegetables, the gardeners also reported learning about new and different cooking techniques:

> …I'm fixing to try something new. The Swiss chard, I've never eaten Swiss chard before…And I've got me some fresh beets and I'm going to cook them totally different than what I've ever cooked them before… it's just broadening your horizons and your taste buds.

Discussion

Gardeners identified several reasons for participating in the community garden. Many gardeners already had experience gardening and participation in the program served as an extension of this interest. Access to fresh and organic produce was valued, and many specifically mentioned a taste preference for garden-grown produce over the store-bought alternatives. A significant number of the participants held strong interests in environmental and economic issues related to contemporary food production; many issues, such as sustainable organic farming and local food production, were common topics of conversation throughout all four focus groups. These discussions ultimately reflected the gardeners' interest in the work done by Jones Valley Urban Farm, and, for many, participation in the community garden was an expression of their support.

Of particular note is the issue of cost-savings. As in previous studies, gardeners mentioned cost-savings as a reason for participating in the community garden, although this cost-savings was mainly with organic produce. Such comments may be a reflection of the differences in demographic characteristics of the current sample, such as income, and future studies that identify whether there are differences in cost issues among certain subpopulations of gardeners may be revealing. It would be of particular interest to examine, firstly, whether participation in the community gardens allows participants to grow produce, organic or not, at a cheaper cost than store-bought alternatives and, secondly, whether this affects the amount of fruit and vegetable intake as compared to control groups. This could be a significant avenue for further study because of research suggesting that food prices and income level may have

significant effects on dietary choices (Cook, 2002; Drewnoski, Darmon, & Briend, 2004; Drewnoski & Specter, 2004).

Gardeners also identified several potential impacts of the Gardens of Park Place that coincide with previous studies of community gardens. Sharing, in terms of knowledge, produce, plants and labor was seen as a positive effect. This value for community betterment extended through additional modes. Many participants specifically mentioned enjoying the personal interactions and spoke positively of the diversity among the gardening group. Additionally, the community garden, as well as the rest of Jones Valley Urban Farm, was considered a good environment for children and an aesthetically pleasing use of downtown space.

With regards to personal health, most of the emphasis was placed upon the psychological benefits of gardening. As in previous studies, gardening was considered a relaxing activity that promoted mental health (Armstrong, 2000; Wakefield et al., 2007). Several participants also spoke of their gardens with pride, finding a significant amount of personal satisfaction with growing their own food. Unlike previous studies, however, there was less mention of gardening as a form of physical activity and exercise.

Regarding diet, many gardeners perceived their garden-grown produce as healthier for two main reasons. By growing and eating organic foods, gardeners felt they were better able to avoid the commonly used chemicals in food production, such as pesticides, inorganic fertilizers and preservatives, which were felt to have a negative impact on personal health. Gardeners also viewed their produce as fresher; and therefore, more nutritious than the store-bought alternatives. These perceptions regarding the quality of garden-grown foods are in line with previous research (Wakefield et al., 2007).

The other perceived impact on diet pertained to an increased exposure to new types of foods. Several gardeners reported learning about, and in many cases growing unfamiliar vegetables because of their participation in the community garden. Additionally, the exposure to new foods extended to learning about unfamiliar cooking techniques. Future research, therefore, could examine not only the potential impact of the community garden program on the types of vegetables participants eat, but also its effect on how participants prepare their food for consumption.

These results should be considered within the study's purpose, method and context, so certain limitations are worth mentioning. The focus group method was employed to better expose the reasons for participation and perceived impacts of this particular community gardener population in order to guide future quantitative research as well as compare to similarly constructed studies of other community garden populations. Therefore, the discussed results are not intended to be generalized beyond the study population. Furthermore, the overall lack of negative or critical comments may reflect the possible situation in which those who would have had such comments would not have been participants in the community garden in the first place.

Similarly, the unique demographic spectrum of participants as discussed earlier should also be considered. Depending on demographic status, such as income, level of education, or proximity to the gardens, participants might have had different reasons for and perceived impacts of participation in the program. A multi-category study, perhaps including members from multiple Birmingham area community gardens, might provide greater insight into such issues. Additionally, participants were asked to report their neighborhood on the demographic questionnaire, but exact residential addresses were not obtained from the participants. This would have been helpful in better quantifying the geographic distribution of the participants, which could have been a significant factor in the participants' perceptions of community gardening.

Even with these limitations, however, the results from this study ultimately correspond to the findings from previous research which suggest that community gardening, in addition to several other impacts, may improve access to healthy foods, increase the amount of such foods eaten, and even contribute to the development of members' cooking and eating habits. Such potential effects warrant further quantitative study of community gardening as a potentially healthful dietary intervention.

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Author Note

Matthew D. Northrop, MD, is currently an internal medicine resident at Tulane University School of Medicine in New Orleans, LA and a graduate of the University of Alabama School of Medicine in Birmingham, Alabama. He may be contacted at 1555 Poydras Ave, SL-50, New Orleans, LA 70112; Phone: 205-568-9444; Email: mnorthro@tulane.edu

Brooks C. Wingo, PhD, is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Alabama at Birmingham in the Department of Nutrition Sciences in Birmingham, AL. She

may be contacted at 1530 3rd Ave South, Webb 318, Birmingham, AL 35294; Phone: 205-996-5029; Email: bcwingo@uab.edu

Jamy D. Ard, MD, is currently an associate professor at the Wake Forest School of Medicine in the Department of Epidemiology and Prevention in Winston Salem, NC. He may be contacted at Medical Center Boulevard, Winston Salem, NC 27157; Phone: 336-716-9837; Email: jard@wakehealth.edu

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