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Community Gardens: Places for Food Production, Places for People

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Community gardens as community places

“Restore the commons!” we are beginning to hear more loudly. The ‘commons’ can again be a means of having urban food production, as well as quality public open space offering a variety of activities and creating a sense of community. The ‘commons’ in the modern city will be known as the ‘green corridor’, ‘community garden’ or ‘city farm’. It will be integrated into the restructured, low density, automobile city as part of urban renewal towards sustainability and it can be done by means of permaculture ethics and principles.

Food production will not tend to be helpful in the city, is if it is seen as a way of giving large numbers of people a big block of land on the urban fringe to grow their own food and rear their own animals, ie. if it is seen as being a totally privatised pursuit, needing comparatively large areas of private land for each household. This will tend to spread the city, creating similar problems to traditional low density suburban sprawl, with everyone needing to own two or more cars, drive long distances to major destinations around the city without any viable public transport system, while generating a big demand for petrol and high production of automotive emissions.

Where food production can be constructive in our cities is where it can be integrated into a philosophy of more compact urban design and housing and efficient use of land, such that it will provide more greenery and a closer, more practical and useful relationship with nature right in the city. Urban food production can be more effectively practiced in community gardens or city farms within a communal framework, with individuals sharing and pooling their skills, rather than on a privatised basis. For example, Vancouver in British Columbia has many high density housing developments built as housing cooperatives and surrounded by extensive gardens and other horticultural activities. The houses are designed on passive and active solar design principles and are located in good proximity to other urban activities, accessible by foot, bicycle and public transport. These qualities are what many people are seeking on a suburban or peri-urban block of land, but in too many cases

it is not what is achieved – cars are the only viable form of transport, there is little contact with nature, the land is wasted and it needs large quantities of water and other resources to maintain it.

This paper will provide a background to the creation of Community Gardens and will then discuss a number of examples in Perth, Western Australia. The focus will be on the suburban sites City Farm in East Perth and Florence Park in South Fremantle.

Conventional parks and gardens

Conventional parks and gardens can be uninviting, inhospitable places with little creativity. They are characterised by that great Australian icon – the lawn. George Seddon (1994) has noted that the lawn has its origin in the forests of Europe of centuries past where tribes would clear areas to see the enemy as they approached to attack. The lawn also featured in previous centuries' lavish country estates of the French and English upper classes. The fruit and vegetables were grown elsewhere by the servants. Today many ordinary Australians and local government authorities are preoccupied with emulating these vast, open, green spaces. Growing food is relegated to beyond the city limits. However, for the large part, Australia needs oases in the desert with efficient use of water.

Lawns take some 40% of Perth's metropolitan water supply after it has received sophisticated treatment, followed by chlorination and fluoridation, to meet NH and MRC standards. The application of garden fertilisers in residential areas contributes more phosphorus to catchments than sewage disposal, detergents and animal wastes. Residential areas are second only to orchards in the amount of phosphorus and nitrogen they contribute to catchments (Gerritse, 1993). Lawns are not an environment-friendly option for private gardens or public open space in drier climates, catchment areas or above aquifers and should perhaps be restricted to sporting venues with careful maintenance.

In addition to 'backyard self-sufficiency' (French, 1992), we can consider the conversion of lawns into more productive systems as a step towards a sustainable urban landscape. For example, if open space around housing is required for play areas a variety of 'weeds' can be used including deep rooted species such as dandelion that will bring nutrients to the surface from deep in the soil; nitrogen-fixing species such as clover; and a mix of grasses to ensure all-year-round greenery. Such a lawn need only be mown occasionally, if at all, and will provide mulch for garden beds. Excessive open spaces of lawns can be sheet mulched providing excellent pre-treatment for conversion to humus-rich vegetable beds and orchards.

Plant small orchards of fruit trees in gardens and on common land along paths and streets, in parks, in neighborhoods: wherever there are well-established groups that can themselves care for the trees and harvest the fruit. (Alexander, 1977)

The features of a community garden

The community garden also has its origins in the past – but not in that of the aristocracy. The 'commons' was once a feature of urban and rural areas alike where ordinary folk could graze their livestock, grow some crops and pick produce from fruit and nut trees.

Communal gardens have been a traditional land use in Europe and the United Kingdom since the early nineteenth century. As early as 1819 in the United Kingdom and 1830's in Western Europe, allotments were set aside for the urban working classes. (Eliot, 1983)

Recently, a survey in the United States found 12,316 community garden sites (Sommers, 1985). They have begun to appear in Canberra (Cornhill, 1993). Melbourne is well known for its community gardens and city farms. Of these, the successful Nunawading Community Gardens Cooperative was established in 1977. The Centre for Environmental Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES) in Brunswick and the Collingwood Children's Inner City Farm, both established in 1979, have been attracting tens of thousands of visitors each year. At APACE in North Fremantle for as little as \$20 per year you can rent a few square metres of land to grow vegetables as part of a larger area dedicated to individual allotments. Individual allotments is also the format of the community garden in the suburb of Karawarra.

Beside this fundamental need for vegetable gardens in cities, there is a subtler need. Parks, street trees and manicured lawns do very little to establish the connection between us and the land. They teach us nothing of its productivity, nothing of its capacities. Many people who are born, raised, and live out their lives in cities simply do not know where the food they eat comes from or what a living garden is like. Their only connection with the productivity of the land comes from packaged tomatoes on the supermarket shelf. But contact with the land and its growing process is not simply a quaint nicety from the past that we can let go of casually. More likely, it is a basic part of the process of organic security. Deep down, there must be some sense of insecurity of city dwellers who depend entirely upon the supermarkets for their produce. (Alexander, 1977)

The values of community gardens are manifold. They provide opportunities for the public to garden, grow food, and work with nature, while at the same time living in a medium density urban environment. They provide a space for learning, social activity, cultural exchange, community art and 'community science'. They can provide a place of beauty for contemplation, or a pleasant stroll. In short, they are productive, empowering and regenerative of the human spirit (Anda, Stocker & Carr, 1994).

One survey (Sommers, 1985) found the following reasons for participation in community gardens:

- better tasting/more nutritious food 42%
- to save money 39%
- for exercise 36%
- therapy 33%
- education 32%
- social interaction 29%
- neighbourhood improvement 14%
- as a family activity 14%

Even the oft-heard expression "backyard permaculture" seems to reflect a culture where growing food is kept out of sight. House fronts, streetscapes and public gardens are ornamental only. Public open space is either for sport or passive recreation

with lawns and amenity plantings. Why is this so? Even individual allotments were tucked away. What are the constraints to bringing food production out into the open? Into the public open space? Some of the following examples in Perth, Western Australia throw light on how some people are trying to answer these questions and put the above ideas into practice.

Miller Street Community Food Garden Inc.

For a number of years a group of people in the Perth suburb of East Victoria Park have been meeting at their Community Garden site on the corner of Miller Street and Carnarvon Street on the first Sunday of every month at 11 am. As well as to tend and nurture their developing garden this group of committed, community-minded people have met to discuss ways of overcoming the enormous bureaucratic hurdles that confront them.

The 2,500 square metres of land used to be the backyards of a group of houses and is thus well-endowed with a number old olive trees and grape vines which still yield profusely. The land is owned by the Planning Commission and faces the threat of one day having a new road go through it. This hasn't discouraged the local community, however, and a detailed permaculture design has been prepared for the site.

Because of the land tenure complications the local council, Town of East Victoria Park, have not provided any support to the people in their initiatives. In fact, rivalry amongst the Councillors has resulted in complete neglect for this dedicated group. A water supply has not been secured and although a windmill is included in the design, funds have not been gained. Accordingly, the group has had to hand-water what they have planted each summer.

So far they have planted herbs, vegetables, fruit trees, nut trees and a range of companion and windbreak species. The group decided on the collective Community Garden instead of individual allotments.

Onslow Road Community Garden, Shenton Park

As a result of the deft negotiating skills of Warwick and Gillian Rowell a number of years ago they were able to convince the private landowner of an empty block of land on their same street to let them establish a Community Garden on the site. Once the landowner decided to develop, however, it would all have to be cleared again. Fortunately, this hasn't occurred yet and this beautiful anomaly in the homogenous suburban landscape still remains.

A local community group was established and within a number of years wonderful yields of produce were achieved. In fact, Warwick even kept a record of the amount of hours of labour that were put into the site's development and compared this against the amount of fruit and vegetables and herbs produced. Permaculture courses were conducted there by Warwick and Gillian and this too contributed to the fecundity of the place.

The variety of innovative features in the garden's design included stormwater harvesting from a nearby carpark which was directed into a depression to create an

ephemeral wetland – a lush winter ‘bog’ and cool, green summer meeting area. Wind-breaks have grown all around from Banna Grass and there are numerous zones of production and places for contemplation. A crop of wheat was even yielded in one season.

Earthwise Permaculture, Subiaco

The garden system at Earthwise is centred around a communal space which provides an environment for people to meet, relate and work together in non-threatening ways. For many years Earthwise has existed as cooperative “op, swap and second-hand stop”. Earthwise is a fully autonomous group and receives no funding. The cooperative space is provided by the Youth Services of the Uniting Church.

The young people who built the permaculture garden were involved through the Landcare Environment Action Program (LEAP) which ran for six months. Their involvement, however, was absorbed into the community of Earthwise. Currently, many of the young people who graduated from the project are continuing on with their work through the formation of an Earthwise garden co-operative.

The garden serves as an extension of the community-focus of Earthwise for two main reasons:

- As a permaculture system it is oriented towards diversity and utility. There are many different varieties of edible, drinkable, smokable plants which people unfamiliar to gardening can relate to and enjoy. It entices people to want to grow and maintain a garden;
- It serves as a meeting point for the (somewhat conservative) Subiaco residents and young people from Earthwise. It is a medium through which sharing can take place – from sharing of interest and a few words to sharing of seeds and growing techniques.

Florence Park: the FINCA community garden

The above projects indicate some of the processes that local groups may have to go through until community-based, urban food production is more widely accepted in Australia. In South Fremantle, a number of residents had spoken of the need to enhance their public open spaces (POS) and street verges with more intensive native plantings, groves of fruit and nut trees and spaces for vegetables and herbs. They formed themselves into an alliance known as FINCA (Fremantle Inner City Agriculture), and set about organising to develop a site into a Community Garden. FINCA is also Spanish for ‘small farm’ or ‘plantation’.

Florence Park is the result of about 3 years of community promotion, organising and training; lobbying Council and Councillors; preparing grant applications; many, many meetings; and then 12 months of enthusiastic work by dedicated volunteers supported by a team of professionals in facilitation, permaculture, bush regeneration, community arts and greywater reuse. The Park was colloquially known as King William Park (an uncared-for patch of half-dead couch grass) – after the adjacent street which was actually called Florence Street up until the 1950’s. FINCA had consulted with local Nyoongars involved with the project and agreed on the

name “Ngulla Jenu” which literally means our track although it actually has a much deeper ecological and community significance. Fremantle City Council conducted a very limited survey of houses around the Community Garden and out of 15 responses Florence Park was the winner.

An interesting outcome of the numerous public meetings was that local residents were not keen on an individual allotments, fences or a predominance of annual species. These were seen to require a large amount of maintenance. People were more interested in a Community Garden with general access for all. The chief aspiration was enhancing their urban aesthetics as well as social interaction. It is more than likely that in an area of great poverty there would be a greater desire for inclusion of higher food productivity annuals as well as trees.

A water-sensitive design approach was a high priority for FINCA and included grey-water reuse, rainwater harvesting, use of endemic species for windbreaks and a framework and low water-use plants in general.

A feature of FINCA’s formulation of Community Garden objectives was the nexus of bush regenerators and permaculture advocates. During the process they worked to resolve a number differences in viewpoints. Many local native species were identified for their function within the permaculture concept. The use of environmental weeds was minimised through careful selection and management techniques.

The Arts were seen as a vital part of the project not only to add beauty and creativity to the site but to mobilise and involve other sectors of the community, to connect with the areas heritage and allow those interesting elements of the past to be brought into the present.

Today the Community Garden is a complex web of flowering and fruiting plants, artworks, greywater irrigation systems drawing from the adjacent houses, children’s play areas and places for contemplation and meeting. Kate Barnett, a dedicated FINCA member and Community Gardener, has conducted a very detailed analysis of the process that occurred over the several years, an Honours thesis in fact, and she refers to the site as a “community place”. A very special place treasured by the local and not so local community where they can come and relax and garden and dream and play.

The lessons learnt by FINCA are that there are many non-technical barriers to the introduction of the community garden concept to urban areas. A policy barrier existed in that the Council did not have a policy on Community Gardens. There are currently no well known models by which to assess the FINCA proposal as a ‘Parks and Gardens’ strategy. Social barriers to Community Gardens will include a lack of time on the part of local residents to assist in design, development and maintenance. Earlier sites which FINCA was unsuccessful in securing for a Community Garden presented cultural-historical issues. There will be institutional barriers, for example, in obtaining certain land use approvals, reuse of wastes on site, water connections or stormwater harvesting and conditions imposed on the use of grants. FINCA underestimated the time-consuming machinations of Council process. However, the time taken proved advantageous for FINCA in that it was able to develop a clear vision and a set of objectives through community consultation.

Kate Barnett has illuminated the complex uncertainties, rivalries, scepticism of each other and other difficulties experienced within FINCA and its relations with residents, council officers and professionals supporting the group. Nevertheless, the most common feeling was that so much was learnt and so much was achieved beyond most people's expectations.

Many of these constraints or problems can become opportunities and these will emerge out of a concerted effort in community consultation between residents, Councillors and Council officers. In fact, out of necessity, the problems for a Council will become the community's opportunity. If the various constraints and opportunities can be understood at the outset it will nearly always be possible to negotiate the acceptance of Community Gardens in the urban planning process.

East Perth City Farm

City Farm has been operating for over two years and is run by volunteers. It is located in the suburb of East Perth on Brown Street between the railway line and the carparks serving "silver city" – the nearby State Government office buildings. The 7,400 square metres of land was an old scrap metal yard. City Farm is run by the Planetary Action Network (PAN) which is a sub-group of the international society of The Men of The Trees.

City Farm aims to provide a living example of the productive uses for unused inner city land. This has already been achieved on a short term basis but a common scenario which has faced other community gardens faces City Farm – the threat of development. The site may one day be resumed for a car park. City Farm seeks to be a living example of permaculture where people can come and learn and harvest organically-grown food for free.

City Farm provides learning and work experiences for people with disabilities. It caters for employment programs such as LEAP (Landcare Environment Action Program), school student tours and provides a calming effect for people who are angry or troubled. Working at the City Farm gives them a feeling of ownership and contribution to the general community. In fact, they and the general community are encouraged to participate in the design and development of this community space.

A number of problems have been encountered at City Farm. The area was littered with the results with vandalism and graffiti. The four large warehouses had been abandoned for over 10 years and were covered with graffiti art. So as not to allow this to continue in areas where it was not wanted the existing works were left and encouragement was provided for the artists to come back with their paint and use the walls as a legal canvas for more positive and creative murals. As a result only 3 minor incidents of unwanted graffiti have occurred in the past 2 and a half years.

Farmers have problems with feral animals and City Farm has had its problems with feral people. The poultry has had several lethal attacks where they were not taken for food. While this was disturbing it was not a deterrent to keeping livestock.

Training unemployed youth is a volatile occupation. They come to City Farm unmotivated, uninspired and often with a criminal record. There have been several

situations where violence has erupted toward fellow students or lecturers. These situations need to be defused without aggression and without fear.

Nevertheless, City Farm provides a safe haven for people of all ages from the community to gather and not feel pressured into spending money which is the common pressure from meeting places such as bars and cafes.

Conclusion

The creators of community gardens live by a noble philosophy. Not only are they an integral part of the global permaculture solution but all the hard work that goes into creating a permaculture oasis is for the community. The selfless workers are committed to building a more natural and holistic lifestyle not only for themselves but for the greater good of the whole community and the planet. Along with the rejection of personal ownership and the encouragement of community involvement, City Farmers place themselves in the critical eye of the public. The visible creation of a positive outcome from negative occurrence is what makes the difference to the public. They can see the creation of a permaculture garden and the determination to achieve is open to anyone to be a part of. Community Gardens are a form of therapy in the desert of suburbia or the heart of the concrete and bitumen, traffic and smog-ridden city. They provide hope for sustainability and renewed community spirit. Wherever there is degraded, abandoned land, under-utilised public open space, vast areas of lawn or vacant land owned by developers waiting for property value increases – there is potential.