The value of community gardens

A participatory evaluation of Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1

The roots ............................................................................................................................... 2
   The community .................................................................................................................. 2
   The garden’s history ........................................................................................................... 3

The stem .................................................................................................................................. 4
   Volunteer roles and responsibilities .................................................................................. 4
   Knowledge and skills ........................................................................................................ 5
   Motivations for volunteering ............................................................................................. 6

The leaves .............................................................................................................................. 8
   Layout of the garden site .................................................................................................. 8
   The garden space ............................................................................................................... 9

The flowers .......................................................................................................................... 11
   Public events .................................................................................................................... 11
   Engaging community groups ............................................................................................... 12
   Environmental education for children and youth ............................................................... 13
   Skills building workshops ................................................................................................... 14

The fruit .................................................................................................................................. 15
   Personal benefits ............................................................................................................... 15
   Social benefits .................................................................................................................... 17
   Ecological benefits ............................................................................................................ 18
   Educational benefits ......................................................................................................... 20

The seeds .............................................................................................................................. 22
   Volunteers’ hopes for the garden ......................................................................................... 22
   A vision for the future ......................................................................................................... 23

Conclusions .......................................................................................................................... 24

References ............................................................................................................................ 25

Appendix A: Literature Review

Appendix B: Research Methodology

Appendix C: Interview Questions

All photos are the copyright of Angie Dazé (2012).
This is the story of a garden in Brockwell Park in South London. Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses (BPCG) is not an ordinary garden. It is tucked away in a corner of the park, behind the tennis courts and not far from the playground. It’s a quite surprising thing to find in an otherwise ordinary city park. When you enter, a busy-looking volunteer greets you. You immediately notice a difference in the noise around you: it is quieter than outside the garden walls, and the sounds you do hear are less of people and more of birds. As you wander around the garden, you discover quiet corners, lush green spaces, helpful signs and plants you’ve never seen growing around London before. You learn that this is a community garden and that it aims to be an educational and social resource for the community as well as a beautiful green space in a highly urbanised environment. You are amazed to discover that the project is run primarily by volunteers, and that everyone is welcome to participate as they are interested and able. You realise that you have stumbled upon a very special place.

The story of the garden is told here using the parts of a plant, showing how these different parts work together to generate a growing, thriving whole. It is the result of a research project conducted as part of a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies. The project aimed to address the question of what people value about community gardens. It involved a series of interviews with volunteers at Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, exploring their experiences with the garden using an Appreciative Inquiry approach. Appreciative Inquiry is a participatory process of discovering what is working well in an organisation or a project, and using this inquiry to envision a better future and create positive change (Cooperider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008). Details of the research process and the interview questions, as well as a review of current literature on community gardens, can be found in the Appendices.

This research project would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of Beth Barber, Project Development Worker during the time of the research, and Peta White, supervisor of the research. The author is incredibly grateful to the BPCG volunteers for taking the time to share their experiences, their memories and their hopes for the future of their garden. This is really their story.
The roots of Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses are the community that surrounds it and the history of the organisation, both of which have shaped the organisation and the site as it exists today.

The community

Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses are located in Brockwell Park in the borough of Lambeth in South London. Lambeth is the largest borough in terms of geographic area in inner London, comprising several distinct neighbourhoods including Waterloo, Brixton, Clapham and Herne Hill, each with their own style and culture. Brockwell Park is on the border between Lambeth and the neighbouring borough of Southwark (Lambeth First, 2011).

“Over the last 100 years, Lambeth has changed from a group of Victorian commuter suburbs to become one of the most cosmopolitan districts in the country” (Lambeth First, 2011, p. 6). The borough has a high population density, with over 100 persons per hectare, compared to the average of 90 persons per hectare for boroughs in Inner London (Lambeth First, 2011). Ethnic diversity is high in Lambeth, with over 36% of the population born outside the UK (Lambeth First, 2011) and a significant proportion (almost 38%) of the population identifying as visible minorities (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) (Office for National Statistics, 2001). This includes large communities of people of Black African and Black Caribbean descent. The population is relatively dynamic, with a ‘population churn’ rate (the proportion of people moving in and out of the borough) of 22-24%. This represents an outmigration rate of approximately 12%, and new arrivals at a rate of approximately 10% (Lambeth First, 2011). Employment rates vary based on ethnicity, with black residents and residents of mixed ethnicity much less likely to be employed than their neighbours who are white or of Indian descent (Lambeth First, 2011).

Lambeth is the fifth most deprived borough in London, and the 14th most deprived in England (Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2010). However, “like many London boroughs, Lambeth has areas of affluence and areas of poverty, often side by side” (Lambeth First, 2011). A characterisation of households within the borough identifies approximately 26% of households as medium-high income, 41% as low-medium income and 32% as low income, described as social tenants in deprived areas. Within this last category, many households are from ethnic minority groups (Lambeth First, 2011). Approximately 35% of children in Lambeth live in poverty (Lambeth First, 2011).
“It’s something that has really enriched me as I’ve grown older, having that understanding and awareness of nature, and I think it’s really important to help give access to that for people who wouldn’t otherwise have it. It’s quite a deprived area, children live in high-rise flats, and they don’t have gardens or access to this sort of thing. So, to have something that teaches children about nature and where their food comes from is really important.” (Volunteer #1)

The garden’s history

What is now Brockwell Park was previously an estate. It was owned by a hospital up to the mid-1500s, and then by a series of wealthy London families. The greenhouses were originally built to provide food for the main house on the estate. In the late 1800s, a portion of the estate was purchased by London County Council to create a park, thereby protecting the land from development. Brockwell Park opened to the public in 1892, and was expanded further in the early 1900s. From this time forward, the greenhouses have been used to serve the park. Since 1998, the greenhouses and surrounding gardens have been used for charitable purposes, serving the local community (Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses: History, n.d.).

The current charitable organisation, Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses (BPCG), has been managing the garden since 2003 (Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, 2010). BPCG is run by a Management Committee, which oversees the day-to-day operation of the site. The strategic development of the site and the organisation are the responsibility of the Board of Trustees. Until recently, the garden was completely run by volunteers, with up to fifty volunteers involved in its management and operation. In the last year, the organisation has been able to secure funds for a handful of part-time, paid positions.

The stated vision of BPCG is “a diverse range of local residents and visitors participate in the resources of Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses to learn, share, and enjoy with the aim of bringing about personal growth and greener communities” (Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, 2010). However, the trustees feel that, with the development of a new business plan for the organisation, the time is right to develop a new vision, which is more inclusive of the views of current volunteers and which better reflects the strengths of the organisation and of the garden itself. This project has facilitated a first step in this process.
The stem supports the plant and allows it to grow. In the case of BPCG, it is undoubtedly the dedication, creativity and energy of the volunteers that have held up the organisation in the years since its establishment and that have supported the garden to develop into what it is today.

**Volunteer roles and responsibilities**

The volunteers interviewed for this research project have been involved with BPCG for periods of time ranging from one month to six years. Most volunteer on a weekly basis, contributing from a couple of hours a week to the equivalent of a full-time job at the height of the growing and harvest seasons. Many of the volunteers interviewed live in the vicinity of Brockwell Park, so convenience is a practical factor that facilitates their ongoing involvement.

The volunteers play a range of different roles in the organisation, including:

- Trustee of the charitable organisation
- Administration and communications
- Horticultural work
- Physical maintenance and development of the site (for example, clearing debris on the site and building structures such as raised beds)
- Coordination of volunteer activities (for example, managing activities on-site or giving inductions to new volunteers)
- Individual projects within the garden (for example, the oil trail and the dye garden)
- Facilitation of community engagement and education
- Organisation and labour for public events (for example, developing promotional materials and cooking food for sale during the event)
- Monitoring and promoting biodiversity on the site
- Supervising entry to the garden during periods when it is open to the public
Generally speaking, volunteers are able to choose the role they will play based on their skills and interests. At times, BPCG has had difficulties in recruiting volunteers with the right range of skills. As is often the case with volunteer-based organisations, volunteer turnover is an issue, although there is a small core group of volunteers who have been with the garden over the medium to long term.

“A major strength of [the garden] is the enthusiasm and commitment and dedication of the core volunteers . . . who are always there and who are always involved. That’s possibly the biggest strength of the greenhouses\(^1\) -- those volunteers and their commitment and their dedication to making things happen.”
(Volunteer #1)

**Knowledge and skills**

A key factor contributing to BPCG’s success and longevity is the range of skills and knowledge that the volunteers bring. Volunteers who were interviewed reported the importance of the following skills and knowledge for their work with BPCG:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisational skills</td>
<td>Horticulture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer skills</td>
<td>Ecosystems and biodiversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification of birds and other wildlife</td>
<td>Aromatherapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classifying plants</td>
<td>Health and safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative thinking</td>
<td>The context and history of the garden</td>
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<td>Photography and mapping</td>
<td>Rules around charitable status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Requirements of existing on park land</td>
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<td>Teamwork and collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to work independently</td>
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<tr>
<td>Networking, facilitation and people skills</td>
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</table>

\(^1\) The volunteers often refer to the garden as “the greenhouses,” so references to the greenhouses refer to the broader garden space, not just the greenhouse structures.
The fact that such a wide range of skills and knowledge are welcomed and valued in the organisation makes BPCG accessible to “people from all walks of life and all backgrounds” (Volunteer #1) who wish to volunteer.

“Everyone has a contribution, really. Some contributions come from a knowledge and an understanding of how things grow, and some contributions are just ideas that people have, but because of the nature of the greenhouses they can come to fruition . . . There is space created for all different kinds of contributions.” (Volunteer #3)

**Motivations for volunteering**

The volunteers describe a range of motivations for being involved with BPCG, and most have a number of different reasons for participating. From a personal point of view, the opportunity to spend time outside is a draw, particularly for people who live in the area and lack gardens of their own. The garden is a very pleasant space in which to spend time, especially when you consider that it is in the heart of one of the most densely populated areas in London (Lambeth First, 2011).

“It’s really relaxing, it’s really peaceful, and you just feel like you’re in nature and you’re not in the middle of London.” (Volunteer #1)

An interest in gardening and seeing things grow, and participating in the process of sowing, weeding, watering and harvesting is a common motivation. Some of the volunteers are experienced gardeners who want to share their skills, while others have very little gardening experience and are there to learn. The opportunity to take on specific projects and tasks provides volunteers with the opportunity to learn about different aspects of the garden that they are particularly interested in, be it composting or soil micro-organisms or the best conditions for growing bamboo. There is an experimental element in much of what happens in the garden, with attempts to grow rice and other ethnic varieties of fruits and vegetables, as well as species such as bamboo, which are not typically grown in London. The opportunity to try out new and different things in the garden is an attractive aspect for volunteers.

“I’m just trying to learn what I can from the garden, from other people’s experiences.” (Volunteer #8)
The desire to be a part of something worthwhile is another motivating factor for volunteers. This links to a desire to see green spaces exist and flourish in the urban environment. This can be the case even for volunteers who don’t participate in the horticultural activities. There is a sense that it is important, particularly for the community around Brockwell Park, to have a space where people can meet and spend time in nature; where they can learn about plants and how their food grows; and where social, economic and cultural boundaries can be broken down through a shared purpose and experience.

“Even if I’m not actually planting the flowers and the vegetables myself, I feel that I’m helping such an organisation to function. That’s what makes it valuable for me.” (Volunteer #1)

For some, the motivation for learning within the garden is linked to objectives outside BPCG. This may be about developing confidence, professional skills and experience that will help in finding paid work. In one case, it is an opportunity to test out working with an organisation like BPCG in order to narrow down the range of options for a future career. Others are keen to learn about gardening so that they can apply it in their own gardens on housing estates, in allotments or at home.

“It means I’m connected to people, it means I’m confident about myself, and it means I’m developing certain kinds of skills. It makes other things possible.” (Volunteer #4)

Regardless of their stated motivation for participating in BPCG, all of the volunteers demonstrated significant commitment to the concept of the garden and to its continued prosperity and development in the future. This came out clearly when they described their hopes for the future of the garden (see *The seeds*, page 22).
The leaves
A unique green space in the heart of London

The leaves are typically the most visible part of the plant, and their exposure to the sun creates the opportunity for photosynthesis, which creates energy for plant growth. This section provides a description of the garden space from the perspective of the researcher and the volunteers.

Layout of the garden site

The map below shows the layout of the garden and how the parts described above fit together.

Figure 1: Garden Map (Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, n.d.)
The garden space

The garden is a beautiful, slightly chaotic space in the middle of a manicured park. Its area includes several different areas with varying purposes and settings. A few of these different parts of the garden are shown below.

The garden entrance

The pond

The forest garden
The demonstration beds

The apiary

The greenhouses

“What it shows is how a relatively small group of people can actually, with some wit and imagination and effort, make quite unusual things happen horticulturally in what is otherwise a fairly basic space.” (Volunteer #9)
The flowers are what draws attention to the plant and brings pollinators (and people) in to have a closer look. BPCG engages in a wide range of community engagement and educational activities that target the general public as well as specific community groups.

Public events

When asked to share favourite memories from their time with the garden, many of the volunteers spoke about the community events that occur several times a year. The events draw people in to the garden, create links with other community groups and raise funds for the organisation to operate. They are advertised on the BPCG website, as well as on notice boards around the park. However, it seems that many people just wander in on their walk through the park.

For the last two years, BPCG has participated in the Big Garden Bird Watch event organised by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The Big Garden Bird Watch occurs across the UK, with individuals and community groups observing, identifying and recording birds in a certain location during a particular hour of the day. The results are submitted to the RSPB and entered into a database. Each year, they produce a report from the event that is used to communicate about the status of bird populations in the UK. At BPCG, a small group of people gathered in the greenhouses to do the observation, and one volunteer took responsibility for submitting the results to the RSPB.

Occasionally, BPCG participates in events organised by other organisations in the community, notably the Friends of Brockwell Park. One such example is the annual Art in the Park event organised in Brockwell Park. As part of the overall event, BPCG organised for a botanical artist to come in to the greenhouses and run sessions on botanical drawing for adults and older children. For younger children, there were arts and crafts sessions, where they made paper flowers to contribute to a “monster plant sculpture” (Volunteer #6). Another example is the winter fair held at Brockwell Hall, where BPCG had a stand selling jams and chutneys and other treats made by volunteers from garden produce. These events have helped BPCG to “integrate more into the life of the park” (Volunteer #6), which will undoubtedly be useful over the longer term.

Often the community events revolve around food, with volunteers doing cooking demonstrations using produce from the garden. The cooking events usually have a theme, whether is it a particular type of cuisine (West African and Thai were mentioned) or a specific type of produce (such as apples or pumpkins). Because the garden is part of Brockwell Park, the volunteers aren’t permitted to produce food for their personal consumption. The cooking events provide a social way to share the products of
the garden with the broader community. There is also an educational aspect to the cooking events, as they help people to make the connection between what is growing in the garden and the food they are eating. Sometimes recipes for dishes served at the event are provided so that people can cook them at home.

“We had cooking demos and members of the public came and tasted various dishes that had been cooked by volunteers from the greenhouse produce. . . . It was a lovely sunny day, everyone was there, it was a really good atmosphere, we were really busy, there was lots of interest from members of the public, and it just seemed to pull together everything that the greenhouses should be about, really.” (Volunteer #1)

Engaging community groups

Community engagement is a strong focus of BPCG, using the garden site as a foundation for supporting learning and social integration by groups who are marginalised due to their economic situation, ethnicity or disability.

On such example is the Growing Friends project, which targets local community members for whom English is an additional language. Participants in the program are offered 12 weekly supported volunteer sessions, providing them with an opportunity to improve their English language skills in an informal setting. In addition to the opportunity to practice speaking English, the project offers participants a chance to spend time outside; practice, develop and share their gardening skills; and meet people in their community with shared interests and experience. Members receive a certificate of participation on completion of the program (Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, 2010a).

Three special needs groups from the community come in to BPCG once a week. This includes one group from a school for young people with special needs and two groups from day centres for adults with learning disabilities. These groups visit the site throughout the year as part of their ongoing programs. At the garden, they engage in a range of horticultural tasks, generally focused on vegetable growing and specifically on the crop rotation demonstration area. The groups take responsibility for care and maintenance on this area over the course of the year. Other groups that use the garden space as part of other programming include youth clubs, gang awareness groups and crime prevention groups.

BPCG also has ongoing relationships with other growing projects in London, including local food growing groups on housing estates and community gardens. Because the garden space includes commercial-size greenhouses, they are able to do propagation of large numbers of plants, significantly more than can be grown on the BPCG site. This provides an opportunity to create linkages with other gardens to supply seedlings. The groups will come in to the greenhouses and plant seeds, possibly through a joint workshop between the two groups, and then BPCG cares for the seedlings until they are ready to be planted out in the partner garden. BPCG also provides training, technical support and mentoring to new gardens being established in the neighbourhood, whether in other parks, on housing estates or in derelict lots. For the park projects in particular, BPCB is a role model, as it has been operational for quite a long time and is perceived to be a successful project.
“We try to do [the activities] in a way that the volunteers can see that what they’re growing is used for something that they believe in.”
(Volunteer #4)

Environmental education for children and youth

In addition to receiving class visits from a large number of schools, BPCG has ongoing relationships with 4-5 primary and nursery schools in the surrounding community, including one group of children with behavioural or emotional problems from a local primary school. These children don’t learn well in the classroom environment, and the partnership with the garden is one of a number of alternative education strategies the school employs to help these ‘difficult to settle’ children learn.

Other types of cooperation with schools involve targeted outreach by BPCG, such as lunchtime nature clubs and propagation of plants for school gardens. In one example, a group of children from a local primary school was involved in building an insect hotel in the garden. The process began with the children undertaking surveys of ‘minibeasts’ on the site, followed by research into different insect habitats. This led to the design of the bug hotel. The children were then set the challenge of designing a bug hotel with as many different types of accommodation as possible in a single structure, taking into account the different habitats preferred by different insects, the need for shelter from the elements and the materials available within the garden to build with. They came up with their design and proceeded to construct it over the course of a few visits to the garden (see photo below) (Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, 2011a).

“Although those children see green spaces, the green spaces they see are swathes of grass in the middle of their housing estate. There is nowhere they can actively engage with nature, and that’s what the community greenhouses offer. It’s a place where they can come and grub around in the dirt, and actively participate in that. And I think that’s such a great handle for environmental education.” (Volunteer #6)
Once a month, on Saturday mornings, the Nature Explorers Club meets in the garden. It’s for children aged seven to twelve years and their caretakers to learn together. Each month there is a different topic – amphibians, leaves and spiders are a few examples. Each session involves a short talk on the specific topic, sometimes by a visiting expert, followed by some practical activities for the children to engage in hands-on learning (for example, pond dipping or looking at plant parts under a microscope). The session ends with an arts and crafts exercise, with children making origami frogs or weaving things out of twigs. The Nature Explorers sessions draw an average of 15 to 16 children each month, along with their caretakers.

**Skills building workshops**

Informal workshops are held regularly on the garden site. These learning opportunities are designed to be accessible so are paid on a donation-only basis, and cover topics of interest to a broad audience, including cooking demonstrations, seed sowing and food growing. This also includes sessions linked to some of the public events, such as the horticultural drawing workshops described above. Starting in 2012, during the summer months, a series of evening walks and workshops will be organised on topics such as medicinal plants and plant identification (Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, 2011).

In an effort to “professionalise and formalise some of the informal learning that had happened previously on the site” (Volunteer #6), BPCG has recently begun organising monthly paid workshops for the public on botanical, horticultural and environmental themes. Topics have included seed saving, pests and diseases, weed identification and weeding techniques and building garden support structures. There are also targeted training sessions for BPCG volunteers on issues such as crop rotation, health and safety and glasshouse growing.

“It’s the active participation which I think makes the learning so valuable. You’re much more likely to remember something you’ve done, something that you’ve actually experienced, and that makes our community garden, and in my opinion all community gardens, immensely valuable.” (Volunteer #6)
The fruit
Benefits to the volunteers and the community

The fruits of the passion, creativity and energy that are contributed to the garden are the benefits that it brings to the volunteers who are involved. This section also touches on the benefits to the broader community, as perceived by the volunteers.

Personal benefits

As mentioned above, because the garden is on City Council land, it cannot be used strictly to grow produce for the volunteers – it must be used to grow produce and run programs that benefit the community more broadly. Despite this, there are many benefits felt by the volunteers on a personal level.

Often volunteers come to the garden at a time when they need something to occupy their time, because they have recently retired or become unemployed, or they are recovering from an illness or personal crisis. Some volunteers have special needs on an ongoing basis; however, this is not an obstacle to their participation in the collective effort.

“It is actually very diverse in terms of who comes there, you know some people are very well-to-do and very clever, some have learning disabilities, some have mental health problems. But we’re all the same when we’re there, and I think that’s nice.” (Volunteer #3)
The garden is a safe and inclusive space, where everyone is welcome to contribute in line with their interests and abilities, and this is highly valued by the volunteers. Differences that might create barriers outside the garden are put aside in a spirit of collaboration.

“Often people are kind of isolated or marginalised, but when they come to the greenhouses they feel that they’re part of something and that they have friends there . . . It’s a levelling place. Everyone is the same there, and it doesn’t matter . . . People are there with a shared purpose. It’s an environment that is so non-competitive and non-judgmental, and I think that’s why it works so well.”

(Volunteer #1)

There is a therapeutic aspect to the garden, both for the volunteers who are involved in running it and for the community groups that use the space. In some cases, this is an explicit objective, such as with the work with difficult to settle children and the adults with learning disabilities. In others, it is less explicit, but it is clear from conversations with the volunteers that it is a part of their week that they enjoy and value and that it brings them a sense of well-being to spend time in the garden.

One of the volunteers works with “some quite troubled children, who go to school for children who are outside mainstream education, and . . . in [the garden] they really flourish and they find something that they really enjoy and they’re good at. I think that gives them a feeling of worth and something that’s valued.”

(Volunteer #1)

Conversations with BPCG volunteers reveal a sense of pride in the garden in terms of how it is perceived in the broader community. While it is acknowledged that it is not as widely known as the volunteers might like, they feel that those community members who do know it see it as a positive contribution.

“The fact that you do have this constant - not enormous numbers of people coming along and saying what a wonderful thing it is you’re doing - but there is a steady flow of encouragement, and occasional praise from people, which makes you feel that this is something that’s actually worth persevering with.” (Volunteer #9)

Related to this is the sense of achievement the volunteers get from the space itself and what is achieved there. The garden provides something to focus on, a project, with tangible results in the form of plants and vegetables and flowers. For a couple of the volunteers, the clearing of the site of rubbish and debris
was a particular accomplishment. In addition to giving them a way to pass their free time, these types of concrete results offer a feeling of personal satisfaction for the volunteers who make it happen.

“It isn’t until you get stuck in and you get to know the other volunteers, that you start to appreciate what it is that you want to see happen there, and how you want to be involved, and how important it is. Because it actually becomes quite important to you, as part of your week.” (Volunteer #7)

For some volunteers there is also a sense of satisfaction that comes from being a part of something that they consider to be meaningful. Volunteers feel good about their work at the garden because they see it as contributing something positive to the broader community, in terms of providing a space for people to gather and spend time in nature and particularly in terms of the outreach the garden undertakes with specific community groups and with children.

“I really believe that horticulture and environmental education are massively important in the cities and more precious, and to me that is what that space offers.” (Volunteer #6)

Social benefits

As a community garden, BPCG is a project with an inherent social agenda. The positive social aspects of the volunteer experience were a common theme throughout the interviews. While there are inevitably differences in personalities and in ideas for how the garden should be run, the volunteers generally work together in a spirit of collaboration and shared purpose.

Volunteers described nice moments shared with others while working side by side in the greenhouses or during public events. Good conversations over pots of tomatoes and cups of mint tea make the time spent volunteering pass quickly. Cooking and sharing food made from garden produce bonds the volunteers together and provides an opportunity to celebrate the results of their collective labour. Some volunteers have developed genuine friendships through their engagement with the garden.

“My abiding memory is one of good fun and camaraderie.” (Volunteer #7)
The social aspect of the garden goes beyond memorable discussions over cups of tea. One of the strengths of BPCG is the diversity of the volunteers in terms of backgrounds, skills and interests. There is a sense that the garden provides opportunities for the volunteers to interact with people that they wouldn’t tend to interact with if they didn’t meet at the garden. One volunteer mentioned that his engagement with the garden helped him to integrate into the community when he moved from another neighbourhood. These connections are particularly important in a community as economically and ethnically varied as the one surrounding Brockwell Park.

“It’s just a real opportunity to mix with and learn about people who in your day-to-day life you would never encounter at all. That’s so important in somewhere like London that is so culturally diverse, because it breaks down these barriers.” (Volunteer #1)

There is sense among the volunteers that this element of community building that occurs in the garden extends beyond the volunteer group to the wider community. As one volunteer put it, the garden gives them “something to gather around and to gossip about” (Volunteer #9). There are regular visitors to the garden who are known to the volunteers, such as an “old couple who just come and sit around the pond” (Volunteer #7). The public events are a key element of the community building process, bringing people together in the garden to share food and learn about nature and growing things and about other people in their neighbourhood.

“Bringing community together. Things are so disjointed now, and everyone is living apart. The idea that you can still have community, and the sharing of knowledge as well.” (Volunteer #2)

**Ecological benefits**

It’s possible that some of the benefits described above could be achieved through a different kind of community project. However, the fact that BPCG is a garden brings an ecological dimension to the project that enriches the volunteer experience and generates a passion that might not exist in another kind of initiative.

A few years ago, the garden site was “really run down. Both greenhouses were full of broken glass. The site had been used as a council dump, there was a lot of rubbish” (Volunteer #4). The longer-term volunteers remember what it used to look like, and they value the changes that have occurred over time, from a derelict lot within the park to a productive, green community space. Many of the
volunteers showed an attachment to the space itself. It was described as “eccentric” (Volunteer #9), “chaotic” (Volunteer #5) and “wild” (Volunteer #4), but always fondly.

“[BPCG is] distinct from everything else. It’s very informal, it’s kind of hidden, and there is something to discover.” (Volunteer #4)

For many of the volunteers, a key benefit of their engagement with the garden is the opportunity to spend time outside in a green space. In inner city London, having a yard or garden is rare and people feel that it is important to be outside and in nature. This creates a connection with and awareness of nature that is valued by the volunteers. For some, this connection is created through the process of sowing, tending and harvesting plants, while others are studying and building understanding of the different elements of the garden ecosystems and the relationships between them.

“It makes you aware of the elements – snow, ice, rain, shine – and obviously I've learned a heck of a lot, just being there.” (Volunteer #8)

The volunteers perceive ecological benefits to the broader community as well. The obvious one is the existence of a productive green space in the centre of a highly urbanised environment, in which people can spend time. However, the garden is more than this. Through the outreach with community groups, through the public events and learning workshops, and through one-on-one interactions between volunteers and visitors on open days, BPCG is playing a role in educating the community around Brockwell Park about nature and ecology (more on this in the next section).

“A lot of the people who walk through that park don’t have access to space where they can actively engage with and learn about the natural environment, learn about the importance of ecosystems and biodiversity, and what we give them is the opportunity to participate in those processes.” (Volunteer #6)
Educational benefits

The learning that occurs in the garden is a benefit that is valued by many of the volunteers. This includes formal learning such as the training sessions offered for volunteers, as well as more informal learning that happens on the site. Examples cited ranged from learning about different varieties of plants, to cooking skills and new recipes, to organisational, management and communication skills. The confidence, skills and knowledge gained by the volunteers are being applied in other aspects of their life, such as in establishing community gardens on housing estates and seeking paid work. The learning element is of particular importance to the volunteers with special needs, who in some cases have found it difficult to engage with the mainstream job market. The garden provides an opportunity for them to build their confidence and professional skills in a low-pressure environment, and this has proven to be valuable for more than one volunteer.

“It’s been life-changing and life-saving for me. At the time when I joined . . . I had never really found my feet in anything. The garden gave me a lot of confidence. I’ve realised now that there are things that I can do.” (Volunteer #4)

In some cases, the desire to be a part of BPCG extends beyond a personal need to spend time outside, to a desire to share their enthusiasm for nature and their knowledge of horticulture and ecological processes with others. The outreach and educational programs undertaken by the organisation give volunteers the opportunity to engage with different groups within the community to facilitate learning about gardening and the natural environment. This process can be highly rewarding for the volunteers involved. As mentioned above, some volunteers have been involved in starting other community gardens, and this extends these benefits even further by engaging more people in the learning process.

“Apart from the enthusiasm I have for plants and the natural world generally, I value the opportunity to communicate that to children. I guess for me, it’s what I call that ‘wow’ moment.” (Volunteer #6)

There is another element to the education the garden provides for the broader community, and that is what they learn about food. Several volunteers mentioned that they felt it was important that people gain a better understanding of where food comes from. Through the demonstration projects within the garden and in particular through the public events, BPCG helps people to better understand that food comes from the earth and how it grows. It also provides people with practical training and
demonstrations of how food can be grown in creative and ecologically sustainable ways. There is also a cultural element to the food education, as the greenhouses are used to grow crops that are not traditionally grown in the UK, such as bananas, and cocoa yams. In some cases, people have never seen a particular vegetable or fruit from their homeland grown in London before. As well, as previously mentioned, the public events often centre on some sort of ethnic food, cooked by someone from the community.

“People have this disconnection between food as it grows and food as they see it on their plate. So I think it’s really important that those connections are made, that it doesn’t really just come in a plastic bag in a freezer or something like that. It’s food and it grows and I think it’s important that people make that connection.” (Volunteer #3)
The seeds allow the plant to propagate – they represent the future. For BPCG, the seeds that will allow it to spread and grow are the volunteers’ individual hopes for the garden and their collective vision for the future.

Volunteers’ hopes for the garden

The research brought to the surface many of the reasons that BPCG exists. It explored the wide range of benefits that the garden brings, primarily to the volunteers, but also perceived benefits to the broader community. When asked about their hopes for the future of the garden, many volunteers expressed a concern that it will continue to exist, which reflects the precarious nature of the organisation and the use of the space for its current purpose. Not surprisingly, there are many questions about the transition to its future that remain to be answered.

While volunteers each had their own individual hopes for the future of BPCG, some common themes emerged from the responses. They can be summarised as follows:

- Continued existence of the garden, with a clear vision and plan for the future
- Achievement of its potential as a resource for the community (secure funding, longer opening hours)
- Better facilities (meeting space, kitchen, classroom)
- Improvement in organisation of structure and operations, while remaining open and inclusive
- More people involved (with useful skills, possibly paid)

There is broad recognition that in order for the garden to realise its potential, things will need to change. At the same time, there is some anxiety about the implications of increased organisation for some of the people who have been really important to the development of the garden over time. Several volunteers expressed concern that the changes may make it less inclusive, less accessible and less useful for those who really need it. It was also noted that the neighbourhood surrounding Brockwell Park is changing in terms of its demographic structure, which raises questions as to how BPCG will evolve with these changes, while ensuring that the “wacky spirit” (Volunteer #9) of the place – the unique, slightly wild atmosphere - is maintained. Finally, as with many volunteer organisations, BPCG faces an ongoing challenge in getting the right range of personalities and skills among volunteers, management committee and trustees to lead the organisation into its future.
A vision for the future

In May 2012, a small group of BPCG volunteers gathered in the lower greenhouse to discuss this research and the way forward for the organisation and the garden space. The researcher presented the preliminary findings of the process to the volunteers and provided them with an opportunity to offer feedback, which has been incorporated in this report. The volunteers brainstormed, prioritised and discussed the main ideas that they felt were important in a vision for the future of BPCG.

Based on this, the following vision statement for 2017 has been proposed:

Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses (BPCG) is a unique, green, growing space, filled with diverse habitats, plants and animals. As an organisation, BPCG is flourishing, with a coherent and flexible structure and plan, effective communication and adequate resources to realise its objectives. Its open, inclusive and accessible structure and supportive environment facilitate diverse involvement in a wide range of activities. The garden provides a model of sustainability and demonstrable benefits to the community, in terms of education and learning, therapy and support for volunteers. BPCG is inspiring, catalysing and enabling actions beyond the garden space.

The draft vision will be presented to the Board of Trustees at their monthly meeting in July. At this meeting, the Trustees will have an opportunity to provide feedback, discuss and refine the vision. The refined vision will then be shared with the wider volunteer body to provide those who did not attend the May meeting at the greenhouses with an opportunity to provide their inputs, and ultimately to approve the vision. This will occur at the Annual General Meeting for the organisation, which is planned for later in the summer. Once the vision is finalised, it will be incorporated into the BPCG Business Plan for the coming five years, which is currently under development.
Conclusions

Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses is a unique community project, which is providing a broad range of benefits to the volunteers involved, as well as to the community surrounding Brockwell Park. These benefits include personal, social, ecological and educational benefits. As such, the garden space and the organisation that runs it represent an important part of the lives of the volunteers and of the social fabric of the community. BPCG faces many challenges that are typical of community-based, volunteer-run projects, but on the whole it is a successful initiative and is valued by the people involved in its operation and management.

BPCG is at a crossroads in terms of its development as an organisation. There is a strong commitment on the part of the volunteers to the garden’s continued existence and prosperity, as described in the draft vision statement. The recent success in attracting funds for paid staff positions and specific activities suggests that there is potential for growth, which could lead to increased positive impacts for both volunteers and the community. Pursuing this growth represents an important opportunity for BPCG. However, with this opportunity comes the challenge of managing the evolution of the garden while maintaining the open and inclusive atmosphere and the unique spirit of the garden space.

BPCG is valuable to the volunteers involved in running the organisation and in cultivating the space, and is perceived to be making a useful contribution to the community as well. The findings of this research provide evidence of the range of benefits that community gardens can provide – individual and collective, tangible and intangible, intended and unexpected. It is hoped that the story of BPCG may have broader significance in terms of demonstrating the value and potential of community gardens, particularly in diverse urban neighbourhoods.
References


Appendix A: Literature Review

According to the United Kingdom’s Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG), “community gardens are unique, locally managed pieces of land that develop in response to and reflect the needs of the communities in which they are based” (Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, n.d., p. 3). The FCFCG noted that in addition to growing plants, many community gardens offer social, recreational, educational and environmental services that are driven by community needs. Okvat and Zautra (2011) defined community gardens simply as “bottom-up, community-based, collaborative efforts to grow food” (p. 374).

Stocker and Barnett (1998) identified three main types of community gardens. The first is a garden that is collectively worked and primarily benefits the organisation that runs it. This could include a school garden or a garden established to provide food for a social service organisation. The second type of garden is also collectively worked, but in this case the benefits reach the broader community. Examples would include gardens run by community organisations for education and training or therapeutic purposes, or ones that allow free access to produce by community members. The third category of community gardens is those that involve individual plots in a collective space. Gardens may be managed by organisations with paid staff, or they may be run on a completely voluntary basis by community members (Milburn & Vail, 2010).

Proponents of community gardens highlight their role as a building block in creating sustainable communities. They describe a range of positive outcomes resulting from community gardens, including personal, social, ecological and educational benefits for both the participants and the surrounding community (Buckingham, 2003; Holland, 2004; Irvine, Johnson & Peters, 1999; Lawson, 2005; Okvat & Zautra, 2011). The following sections provide an overview of these benefits as described in the literature on community gardens.

Personal Benefits

For many people, particularly those from disadvantaged or minority groups, the act of growing food in a collective space can lead to a sense of empowerment (Buckingham, 2003; Lawson, 2005). “We may not be able to stop war, global warming, or a depersonalised global economy, but we can grow our own food and build ourselves a refuge and oasis” (Lawson, 2005, p. 291). Some community garden projects have specific aims of targeting marginalised groups, such as refugees, transient people, prisoners and persons recovering from addictions, engaging them in the garden as a form of therapy, rehabilitation and self-determination (Buckingham, 2003).

When people have the opportunity to grow their own food, it enables them to choose both the types of fruits and vegetables they would like to produce, and how they will produce them (Buckingham, 2003). For example, Buckingham (2003) cited an example of a community garden in east London, which has brought a group of women of Bangladeshi origin together. An evaluation of the project found that the women involved felt less isolated because they had the opportunity to make friends and work together with other women of their culture. As well, they appreciated the opportunity to grow Bengali varieties of vegetables, which offered a connection to their home country but were sometimes difficult to access in London (Buckingham, 2003).

Health benefits resulting from community gardens accrue in three key areas. First, gardeners can choose to use little or no chemicals in the production, storage and processing of food grown in
community gardens. In fact, many community gardens require that members use specific practices, such as organic agriculture (Irvine, et al., 1999). This is in contrast with the mainstream globalised food system, which is heavily reliant on chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and preservation agents (Buckingham, 2003), not to mention genetically modified organisms. While there is some debate as to whether there are measurable health benefits associated with eating organic foods, many believe that they reduce exposure to potentially harmful substances and provide greater nutritional benefits, and currently there is no evidence to dispute this (Edwards-Jones & Melchett, 2005). Secondly, there are physical and therapeutic health benefits resulting from the exercise and stress relief that can be realised through gardening (Buckingham, 2003). Finally, engaging in a community garden may increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, leading to nutritional benefits.

Social Benefits

There are a number of aspects of community gardens that demonstrate their benefits from a social perspective. The most obvious of these is the social connections that form through membership in the garden, and the exchanges that occur as people spend time together in a collective space (Milburn & Vail, 2010). Gardens provide “an opportunity for people with different class, racial or ethnic background to come together around a common interest” (Glover, Shinew, & Parry, 2005, p. 79; Lawson, 2005). As a result, many participants in community gardens cite social reasons for their participation (Glover, et al., 2005).

In many cases, community gardens have social benefits that extend beyond the garden itself, contributing to broader community development objectives. While it is unlikely that gardens in and of themselves will achieve sustainable community development, they can contribute a number of resources that support the process, including food, recreation, education and environmental restoration (Lawson, 2005). Further, the connections made between participants in the garden, combined with the sense of accomplishment achieved through its development, can inspire activism on other issues affecting the community.

In many cases, community gardens have been started in response to an economic or social crisis, such as the economic depression in the United States in the late 1800s (Milburn & Vail, 2010) or the marginalisation of specific cultural groups in the United Kingdom (Holland, 2004). Consequently, many community gardens are linked to other organisations, in particular social services and educational programs. For example, in the Bangladeshi women’s garden cited above (Buckingham, 2003), other community groups in the same neighbourhood have begun offering complementary programs, including courses in organic gardening, composting and horticultural therapy, as well as language classes to help members improve their English skills. In other cases, surplus food is donated to food banks or other community organisations (Irvine, Johnson, & Peters, 1999). Each of these scenarios links the garden to the broader community’s well-being, providing benefits to both the garden participants and their neighbours. “The promoters of urban gardens have rarely considered them simply as places to grow food and flowers; rather, they have viewed them as a means to address much larger social concerns, such as economic relief, education reform, and civic accord” (Lawson, 2005, p. 287). Milburn and Vail (2010) noted, however, that the potential for a garden to achieve broader community development objectives is highly dependent on how it is designed, developed, and managed.

Ecological Benefits
From an ecological perspective, community gardens offer several important benefits. They are often established on derelict land, transforming these neglected spaces into green enclaves, often within highly urbanised areas (Buckingham, 2003). The ecological benefits of green space within cities include improvement of the microclimate, increased drainage, reduced pollution, reclamation of degraded land and support for biodiversity (The Urban Green Spaces Task Force, 2002). Urban gardens create demand for compost, reducing the amount of organic waste sent to landfills, and can promote recycling of household objects as equipment for the garden (Buckingham, 2003). As well, they can foster a sense of pride in the neighbourhood, which may lead to other environmental improvements such as reduction in littering (Irvine, et al., 1999).

There are environmental benefits associated with sourcing food closer to where it is consumed. The buy local movement and the concept of ‘food miles’ have received criticism for over-simplification of the issue of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from food production and marketing (Mariola, 2008), and for engaging people only as consumers rather than as citizens getting involved in their food system (DeLind, 2010). In this context, community gardens are often cited as an example of a local alternative food system which genuinely reduces greenhouse gas emissions associated with production, processing, storage and transportation of fruits and vegetables, and which actively engages people in planting, harvesting and processing their food as part of a broader community effort.

Educational Benefits

Urban community gardens can play a critical role in environmental education, reducing the sense of disconnect between urban dwellers and nature, and providing a platform for broader environmental lessons. In some cases, this is an explicit objective of the garden, while in others it happens organically (Buckingham, 2003; Lawson, 2005; Stocker & Barnett, 1998).

Sometimes the lessons are didactic, conveyed through workshops and classes. But quite often the lessons are subtle and rely on personal enlightenment through the process of working in the garden-digging in the soil, witnessing worms, seeing detritus become rich soil, watching plants grow, and marvelling at the production of fruit and flower (Lawson, 2005, p. 290).

Stocker and Barnett (1998) refer to the “community science” (p. 183) that occurs in community gardens, through development, testing and implementation of technologies such as organic gardening and permaculture. These processes can also contribute to learning objectives for participants and users of the garden.

Conclusion

The above review briefly describes the range of benefits that community gardens provide as described in the current literature. However, more research is needed to evaluate and document these benefits in order to provide evidence in support of the continued existence and development of these important community resources. The case of Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses is a small contribution to this effort, providing examples of each of the categories of benefits described above.
Appendix A References


DeLind, L. (2010). Are local food and the local food movement taking us where we want to go? Or are we hitching our wagons to the wrong stars? Agriculture and Human Values, Online First. doi: 10.1007/s10460-010-9263-0


Appendix B: Research Methodology

The Major Project consisted of a participatory evaluation of Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses, using Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

Project Objectives

The objectives of the project were: to use an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process to evaluate the benefits of participation in BPCG; to facilitate a visioning process for key stakeholders of BPCG based on preliminary research results; and to provide analysis and documentation that will serve as inputs to longer-term planning by the organisation.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a participatory process of discovering what is working well in an organisation or a project, and using this inquiry to envision a better future and create positive change. The AI process seeks to discover and value “those factors that give life to a group or organisation” (Cooperider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008, p. 3). Stakeholders are invited to share stories about their positive experiences within the group or organisation, providing insights into these life-giving factors (Cooperider, et al., 2008). There are two fundamental points underpinning the AI process: that “organisations move in the direction of what they study” (Cooperider, et al., 2008, p. 33), and that application of the AI process represents a conscious choice to focus on, and therefore move towards, the best aspects of the organisation.

“Evaluation is a means for gaining a better understanding of what we do and the effects of our actions in the context of culture, society, and the work environment” (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 41). In contrast to typical evaluations, which tend to focus on problems, Appreciative Inquiry evaluation focuses on positive experiences and seeks to find ways to build on these to generate an organisation or project that is the best that it can be (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006).

The AI process consists of four major steps. These steps have been described in different ways by different researchers (notably, the 4-D model developed by Cooperider, et al. (2003)). In this project, the model used by Preskill and Catsambas (2006) (based on the model developed by EnCompass LLC) was applied. The approach and language of this model were the most appropriate to the research project. In this model, the four stages are: Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, and Implement (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 15).

The Major Project focused on the first two stages of the AI process. The data collection and analysis was primarily focused on the Inquire Stage. The results of the data analysis informed the Imagine Stage, which was facilitated by the researcher. The process is described in further detail in the following sections.

Stage One: The Inquire Stage

Data Collection
Data collection was focused on the Inquire stage, and was collected through ten individual, semi-structured interviews with ten BPCG volunteers. Participation in the interviews was on a voluntary basis and the opportunity was presented to all volunteers. The Project Development Worker supported the process by encouraging volunteers engaged in a range of different activities within the organisation to participate in interviews.

All active BPCG volunteers were invited to an initial orientation meeting, wherein the researcher provided a brief introduction to the project objectives and the Appreciative Inquiry process, and invited volunteers to participate in interviews. Volunteers who did not attend the orientation meeting were also invited to participate in interviews, by email and/or directly approached by the Project Development Worker.

The individual interviews consisted of open-ended questions following the Appreciative Inquiry model. The questions provided an opportunity to describe experiences, opinions and perceptions of BPCG in narrative form. They are presented in Appendix 3. All of the interviews were conducted by phone, except for one, which was held in person following the orientation meeting. All interviews were recorded with a digital audio recording device and transcribed by the researcher using Dragon Dictate software.

Data Analysis

The interview responses were analysed to draw conclusions about the most valued aspects of the community garden from the perspective of key stakeholders. The coding themes were identified within the four broad categories of benefits identified through the literature review: personal, social, ecological and educational. The analysis focused on identifying the common themes emerging from the interviews within these four categories. Quotes from volunteers were selected to illustrate these themes using the volunteers’ own words. To ensure anonymity of interview participants, volunteers have been assigned numbers and the quotes attributed accordingly.

Stage Two: The Imagine Stage

Following the data analysis, BPCG volunteers were invited to a second meeting. Approximately ten volunteers attended the meeting, including some who had participated in interviews and some who were new to the research. The preliminary results of the data analysis were presented, and stakeholders were invited to ask questions and provide feedback on the results. Subsequently, the researcher facilitated a process to develop a draft vision for the future of BPCG, based on the research results and using the AI approach for the Imagine stage (Cooperider, et al., 2008; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). The BPCG visioning consisted of an iterative process. First, volunteers reflected individually on the words or ideas that they felt were important in a vision for BPCG in 2017. These individual reflections were then shared in small groups. The groups identified common themes and narrowed down to the ideas that they collectively felt were most important. These ideas were shared and discussed in plenary and consensus was reached on the words and themes that should be included in the vision statement. As time didn’t permit the actual drafting of the statement in the meeting, a draft was prepared by the researcher and refined by the BPCG Project Development Worker before being shared with BPCG stakeholders.

2 The Project Development Worker also participated in an interview, but answered the questions based on her experiences as a volunteer with the organization. In addition to her paid time, she contributes a significant number of hours as a volunteer.
Appendix B References


Appendix C: Interview Questions

The following questions were used in interviews with BPCG volunteers.

Introductory Questions

Q1. How long have you been volunteering at Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses?
Q2. What role do you play in your volunteer work with the garden?
Q3. How often do you come to volunteer?
Q4. Can you describe an average day for you in volunteering at the garden?

AI Core Questions

Q5. Next, I’d like you to think of a time that stands out to you as a high point in your participation with Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses. Tell me the story of this experience. Where was it? What happened? What made it a high point for you?
Q6. Without being humble, why do you think you are a valuable part of Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses? What are the most important strengths that you bring to the garden?
Q7. Imagine a time when you felt really good about being a volunteer at BPCG. What were you doing? Why did you feel that way?
Q8. What is it about the nature of your volunteer work with the garden that you value most?
Q9. Why do you continue volunteering at the garden?
Q10. Why do you think the garden is important to the community around Brockwell Park?
Q11. If you had three wishes for the garden, what would they be?