Seeds of Sustainability: Food Literacy
Communication in Sharing Gardens

By

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Abstract

Food is omnipresent in our lives. As humans, we spend a great deal of time thinking about it, growing it, marketing it, looking for it, and consuming it. Yet access to food is anything but guaranteed, even in a thriving city like Vancouver, Canada. On the North Shore, where the cost of living is high and the number of vulnerable residents relying on food aid is growing, the Edible Garden Project (EGP) and its volunteers are focused on narrowing socio-economic gaps. By exchanging and generating local food knowledge, as well as producing food in sharing gardens using ecologically responsible methods to supply neighbours in need, the EGP is articulating urban sustainability in practical terms and via sensory means. Using ethnographic research, I sought to explore this phenomenon and place it in the context of a culture advocating hyper-local food sovereignty and community-based health management to ensure its future.
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Introduction

In 2012, while Vancouver, Canada, was grabbing headlines for ranking third in The Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) annual list of most liveable cities in the world, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFBS) was diligently assisting more than 27,000 residents in need every week—10 percent more than the previous year. The financial pressure is only increasing, with the EIU’s *Worldwide Cost of Living 2013* report revealing Vancouver’s position as the most expensive city in North America. The enduring disconnect between the media’s depicted idyllic West Coast life and the daily struggles of a growing number of vulnerable people moved the city’s environmental stewardship and social justice advocates to promote grassroots initiatives that united communities, as well as improved and secured access to reliable food sources for all residents (Adelman & Sandiford, 2007).

On Vancouver’s North Shore, where housing prices alone are among the highest in the city (Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver, 2013), the Edible Garden Projects’ community sharing gardens have emerged as dynamic settings where volunteers exchange and generate local knowledge about food, invest themselves in producing food in an ecologically responsible manner to help support their vulnerable neighbours, and come to understand urban sustainability as a city’s long-term viability through the well-being of its residents and environment (Block et al., 2011; Dempsey, Bramley, Power & Brown, 2011). Instead of considering sustainability as a topic of communication within the context of urban economic growth (Balasescu, 2011, p. 297-298; Chang, 2010, 2013), putting sustainability principles into practice through the process of teaching and acquiring food literacy skills in sharing gardens becomes the means by which to communicate food security and sovereignty as a social value (Melkote, 2002; Shi, Cheng, Lei, Wen & Merrifield, 2011; Starr, 2010; Ziemann, 2011).
Much is written about proliferating urban community gardens as vignettes of social transitions towards a more sustainable way of life. However, these accounts often focus on hobby gardeners, projects that reconnect urban dwellers (particularly children) with natural foods or initiatives helping those in need learn how to abide by healthy diet guidelines on a very limited budget. Drawing on scholarly work around issues of food security (Dixon, Donati, Pike & Hattersley, 2009), the promotion of alternative agriculture practices and land use (Ladner, 2011; Naylor, 2011), sustainability communication (Shane & Graedel, 2000), and locally based collaborative economics and politics (Cohen & Garrett, 2010, p. 473; Curtis, 2003; Perkins, 2007; Sens & Stoett, 2010, p.70), I set out to explore how sharing gardens might encapsulate various local sustainability issues—from crop diversity and waste management to resource allocation and productivity metrics (Coenen, Benneworth & Truffer, 2012; Servaes, Polk, Shi, Reilly & Takupitijage, 2012, p. 110). I researched how they not only acted as “arenas of development” (Jorgensen, 2012), but also demonstrated how sustainability might exist through the inextricable yet ever-changing links that connected members of a community (Garud & Gehman, 2012). Through those links, Edible Garden Project volunteers are helping their culture redefine and communicate its core values, and their involvement in the public consultations that led to the development of a proposed North Shore Community Food Charter in October 2013 serves as one case in point. The charter, which the North Shore’s three municipalities and the North Vancouver School District Board of Education have endorsed, is a grassroots project that synthesizes community principles relating to food production, processing, distribution, access and consumption.

The main objective of my research was to better understand how volunteers in Edible Garden Project sharing gardens used the multisensory experience of group gardening to enhance
the processes of teaching and acquiring food literacy skills. I also sought to find out how the
volunteers established and articulated the connection between their own actions and the nurturing
of a healthy, sustainable community (Teng, Escaler & Caballero-Anthony, 2011, p.60). My hope
is that the research findings can contribute to the advancement of sustainability communication
theory and raise awareness of how a local community’s appropriation of food literacy and
security communication through multisensory means might ultimately lead to its ecological and
social sustainability by ensuring food sovereignty for all, including its most vulnerable residents.

**Literature Review**

The notion of a shrinking planet has been a familiar theme in the discourse surrounding
the advent of the Internet and the Information Age over the past two decades. Technological
innovation has facilitated communication between individuals, as well as across nations and
cultures, hence the sense that the world is getting smaller. Consider that planet both in terms of
the area that it spans and the resources that it provides against a growing population, and the
theme becomes that much more relevant. The United Nations (2013) foresees the global
population topping 7.3 billion by 2015, with more than half of people living in cities. As
Balasescu’s research (2011, pp. 297-298) reminds us, an Urban Age is upon us.

This vision of the future has moved urban planners to consider sustainability as a survival
issue and key economic indicator. Focusing on two urban extremes, namely the megalopolis that
is Istanbul, Turkey, and the comparatively small Romanian city of Bucharest, Balasescu argues
that a city is not a concept removed from its residents and their actions. A city is not only
inhabited, but it is also actualized through the residents’ contribution to it and their experience of
it, with all of the individual and collective actions, aspirations and conflicts that one might expect.
He identifies the need to therefore rethink sustainability as more than a marker of economic
growth, and as a broader sphere that also contains the concepts of “co-habitation, negotiation and harmony” (p.298), relates to ethical civic considerations, and pertains to people’s connection to both each other and the environment.

It is from a similar perspective that Chang Chiung Ting (2013) arrived at a prototype community-based model of sustainability that differs from the habitual triangle concept linking social, economic and environmental dimensions. It is an attempt to answer the question, “Would it be possible to conceive a flattened system, with diminishing economic resources or without refilling financial resources?” (p. 227). Seeking viable responses to the challenges of human organization in the face of population growth and eroding financial capital, Chang proposes the deliberate shift to a sustainability model whose main pillars are social capital (i.e., social networks and norms) and natural capital (i.e., publicly shared natural resources, including land and water), the two reinforcing each other through community members’ local participation, mutual trust and collaboration with the goal of achieving stability for themselves and the community over the short and long term—he tested his model in three studied cases in Taiwan’s capital of Taipei and two indigenous mountain villages. As Chang rightly points out in tying his reflection to that of scholars Ishihara and Pascual (2009), a key element in this dynamic is the willingness of a community’s dominant group to create common knowledge and share it with other members, noting, “If sharing common knowledge is established, collective action can succeed” (p.230).

Shane and Graedel (2000) defined a provisional set of knowledge-building sustainability metrics and applied it to Canada’s city of Vancouver and its environmental vision. They strove to demonstrate the need for urban areas to track, assess and reflect on their progress towards sustainability, as well as communicate the outcomes of that evaluation to all stakeholders in
order to realize their vision. Spanning natural resources, infrastructure and people, which the
researchers had identified as being integral to any city, the metrics covered ten data categories:
air, water, solids, transportation, energy, resource use, population, urban ecology, liveability, and
general environmental management. The data themselves ranged from greenhouse gas emissions
and waste generated per capita to open space per capita and the United Nations Development
Programme’s Human Development Index (p.648). Shane and Graedel also proposed an
alternative metrics set that considered other markers, such as the measure of residents’ happiness
as key indicator of liveability, and environmental education or urban dwellers’ overall
understanding of the environment (p.649).

As researchers, urban planners and city dwellers in regions like Vancouver ponder these
new metrics and their application to a world in which accounts of increasingly scarce resources
stemming from growing demand and climate change become ringing warning bells, issues such a
food security jump to the forefront of the sustainability discourse. There is a realization that time
is ticking for the industrialized agricultural ecosystems and affluent diets that negatively affect
people’s health and the environment (Dixon, Donati, Pike & Hattersley, 2009). This, in turn,
leads to sustained interest in making food systems more visible and accessible in cities, and
bringing agriculture into urban life to not only grow more food, but also make the experience of
it more “convivial and sensual” (Delind, 2006, p. 142).

Delind’s desire to consider food in more than practical terms has a parallel in Block et al.’s
proposed restructuring of the “food as health” paradigm to “food for well-being” (2011, p. 5).
Food is not just about putting nutrients into one’s body, but rather people who sit down for a
meal are “seeking physical in addition to emotional and psychological nourishment—comfort,
pleasure, love, and community.” Therefore, when learning about food and agriculture in the
context of urban sustainability, one must consider social elements alongside the preservation of
the ecosystem and people’s physical health. From this perspective, Block et al. derive a holistic
definition of food literacy based on three main components: “conceptual or declarative
knowledge, procedural knowledge, and the ability, opportunity, and motivation to apply or use
that knowledge” (p. 7). This suggests that the nurturing of a healthy, sustainable urban
community and its food security is linked to the inhabitants’ own knowledge and actions (Teng,

Researchers like Cohen and Garrett (2010) view urban agriculture not only as fostering
ecological and social sustainability, but also as a potentially effective collaborative economics
strategy, one that exists within what Curtis calls the “eco-localism paradigm” (2003, p. 83). As
an application of eco-local economic theory whose central argument is that “economic
sustainability is best secured by the creation of local or regional self-reliant, community
economies” (p. 83), it “responds to a ‘disconnect’ between the values, vision, practices and
policies of eco-localists and conventional discussions of economics and sustainability” (p. 84). In
reconnecting these elements and tapping into capital in all of its forms—natural, social, physical,
financial and human—eco-localists focus on needs and wellbeing, and position community
members as producers as well as consumers. In Perkins’s view, it is a promising way forward to
consider sustainability as anchored in feminist ecological economic theory, noting that new
approaches “allow the possibility of envisioning a democratic, creative, and diverse transition to
sustainability, driven by human ingenuity with no limit to the value and well-being which may
be produced within the framework of social justice, renewable energy and reused/recycled
materials” (2007, p. 229).
From a feminist point of view, grassroots initiatives such as hyperlocal urban agriculture projects relate to the expression of social values like equity and dignity, as much as they support community health and environmental stewardship. As Adelman and Sandiford explained when writing about the importance of studying food and developing a critical literacy of food practices, “The way a society grows food reflects the way it uses and values its resources—seed, soil, water, energy and human labor, among others. Thus, eating is also essentially an ecological act” (2007, p. 6). Drawing from farmer and author Wendell Berry’s own manifesto (2010, pp. 145-152), they also note that, “although most modern urbanites do not view ourselves as connected to agriculture, we are, by virtue of eating, directly linked to the industrial processes of growing and distributing food.” This speaks to the links that bind all members of a community, including a place like Vancouver’s North Shore where residents are effectively on a sustainability journey together, whether they are thriving or struggling daily to meet basic needs, such as feeding themselves and their families.

For Garud and Gehman (2012), such community actors “are neither insiders nor outsiders, but instead are part of ongoing entanglements” (p. 983). They are part of a network of consumer/producers for whom “the ‘market’ is no longer a selection environment, but an important battlefield in which the criteria of what counts, how it counts and for whom are themselves being shaped and reshaped” (p. 984). In striving to understand the urban dwellers’ common journey toward sustainability in all its forms, as well as the social phenomena that inspire it, a sensible place to start is therefore “in media res, or in the middle of things. As one consequence, the relational perspective encourages researchers to follow phenomena in-the-making” (p. 991). In other words, follow the actors.
In society, actors not only perform actions to complete a set of tasks, but also to communicate their values. In considering a city’s sustainability journey as a facet of development, the communication of that experience is well positioned within an empowerment framework, where the role of an actor or “change agent” is as a “collaborator, facilitator, participant, advocate for individuals and communities, risk taker, activist” (Melkote, 2002, p. 430). These multiple roles are solicited in the pursuit of outcomes that include “increased access of all citizens to material, psychological, cultural and informational resources; honing of individual and group competence, leadership skills, useful life, and communication skills at the local level; honing of critical awareness skills; empowered local organizations and communities.”

In the urban food “arenas of development” (Jorgensen, 2012), the actors, in the experience and performance of all their roles, become the embodiment of “food as community” (Starr, 2010, pp. 484-485) and hyperlocal permaculture itself as food literacy and sustainability communication (Ziemann, 2011, p. 89).

In Balasescu’s vision of our highly urbanized future (2011), our understanding of environmental and social sustainability, as well as community in whichever form it is lived and expressed, becomes integral to our survival and to the very fabric of our human experience. Vancouver-based Edible Garden Project’s North Shore urban sharing gardens and their mandate of growing food for vulnerable residents encapsulate many aspects of that experience. Their volunteers also lay a pathway for food aid recipients to move toward food sovereignty.

**Research Design**

**Framework**

I chose to use sensory ethnography (Crang & Cook, 2007; Nakamura, 2013; Pink, 2009) to research the Edible Garden Project community sharing gardens, as well as how the
organization’s volunteers and staff members honed their own food literacy skills and helped others acquire them. Approaching the Edible Garden Project as not only a community of volunteers and food growing experts, but also a culture with its own language, value system and customs, ethnography as a broad research strategy seemed fitting because it focused on a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013, p.90). Ethnographic research was an avenue to witness, experience and come to understand how members of a sharing garden communicated sustainability in their cultural context. What explicit instructions and performed knowledge was communicated between members? What knowledge was assumed? Which tensions existed, and how were they resolved? How did members position themselves within the broader local society, particularly as it related to their connection to vulnerable residents? Which patterns emerged from these cultural phenomena (Creswell, 2013, p.92) and how did they inform sustainability and food communication theory? I believed that ethnographic research could help answer these questions. From there, placing an emphasis on sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009) was the next logical step.

Food and the process of acquiring food literacy skills are highly sensory experiences in the context of a sharing community garden, so it made sense to employ a research strategy to match. Sensory ethnography helped me capture the many facets of the sustainability and food security communication that occurred among the sharing garden volunteers and staff, as well as between the research participants and me. Being alert to the sensory aspects of communication also helped me understand what sustainability-related meanings the volunteers drew from the sensory experience of sharing food knowledge (Pink, 2009, p.73), how their senses supported information retention, and how the emotions they triggered might have turned food production practice into social value. Finally, the research strategy positioned me within the sharing garden
culture as not just an observer who was removed from the communication that was taking place, but as a “sensory apprentice” (Pink, 2009, p. 69) and therefore less of an outsider.

A Dual Role - The Researcher as Participant

Any group, organization, or culture has its gatekeepers. Their task, be it assigned or taken on instinctively, is to manage the inbound and outbound flow of people, resources, ideas, information, and influences on their community’s behalf. In order to gain access to that community, researchers can take determined steps to join the community, temporarily or permanently, and offer to support its gatekeepers, who then hopefully become allies and even active collaborators. This was my approach when I first contacted the Edible Garden Project’s former manager in the summer of 2013 to introduce myself, outline my research plan and its purpose, and ask for an opportunity to not only approach sharing garden volunteers for research participation, but also work alongside them (see a copy of my invitation to research participants in Appendix A, and a copy of my consent form in Appendix B). The fact that one of the organization’s core mandates was the sharing of knowledge among people with varying skill levels made my participation as a keen yet inexperienced helper possible. The sharing garden community being spatially dispersed and intermittent (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 39) also mitigated the risk of my being perceived as only occasionally and therefore opportunistically interested in the work.

While assuming the dual role of researcher and participant helped to move my research along, it also came with its challenges. I had to both lose myself in the experience in order to make the most of my sensory ethnographic research design, but also continually remind myself and the other participants of my role as a researcher, especially as my public face morphed from that of a stranger to a more familiar one. Everything that I observed, discussed and experienced
would eventually find itself on the record in my field notes. Further adding to the multiplicity of my role was my heightened interest in growing food, which led me to start my own home-based sharing garden (see images in Appendix E). From a researcher/participant, I also became a community advocate through the application of my knowledge and experience in another sphere of my life, and by communicating with members of my own networks.

**Methods of Data Collection**

I collected data primarily through participant observation and field notes within the sharing garden environment, and semi-formal interviews (see Appendix C for a list of sample questions), some of which were audio recorded. This data collection involved a total of 19 participants, including four members of the Edible Garden Project staff and nine volunteers who regularly attended group gardening sessions at sharing gardens (namely the Booth, Bridgman, Lillooet, Lynnmour, Queen Mary and Sailview gardens) and Loutet Farm, my primary sites. The volunteer who coordinated BUG (Building Urban Gardens) Blitzes to support people who wished to start a food garden, as well as five other local food sovereignty and sustainability advocates, completed my group of participants. The sample size was appropriate for ethnographic research (Creswell, 2013, p. 157), and it allowed me to include a wide range of experiences from key actors in the sharing garden community.

The reason that I decided to conduct the greater part of my research at the sharing gardens and at the Edible Garden Project offices (for some of the semi-formal interviews) was that people have different selves, and often the part that we are most interested in researching is more salient in one environment than another. For example, if I were to interview people about parenthood, I might want to do it at their family home instead of at their office. Conducting most of the research in the garden space also suited the semi-constructed interview format. An open
query such as, “tell me about this place” would potentially be a more powerful query in locum, especially because I sought to understand a communication phenomenon within the particular context of the sharing garden. For the same reason, it was beneficial for me to invite the BUG (Building Urban Garden) Blitz volunteer coordinator to come to my home to have her both speak about what she does, but also perform it so that I could, in turn, experience and record it.

I used hand-written field notes to record data such as the sharing gardens’ physical environment, interactions among volunteers and with the public, and tasks performed in the group gardening sessions. I then transcribed those notes onto my computer, so that I could more easily organize and code them according to themes. I also used photography as means of generating additional qualitative data through participant observation (e.g. documenting non-verbal communication and artifacts) and providing more cultural context to help me make sense of the data that I had gathered using the other research methods (Pink, 2010).

At the Sailview Community Garden, for example, volunteers use a burlap-looking coconut mat to cover the soil that borders tomato and other beds. It is biodegradable, keeps the weeds out and is recycled waste from mattresses—something that I learned from witnessing and later joining a conversation. Using sensory ethnography, namely photography, I was able to capture other functions and meanings of the mat (see image 1 below). For one, it kept the edge of the tomato plot that bordered one of the garden aisles tidy, which, as I found out in an unrelated conversation, was an ongoing concern because the garden was located in the back parking lot of an apartment building whose residents were not involved with the Edible Garden Project. A photograph of the edging mat served as evidence of the volunteers’ need to be tidy as they worked in the allotted space to keep residents happy and secure the garden’s longevity.
Another means of collecting data from observed phenomena was by participating in the group gardening sessions so that I could solicit my own sense of touch, smell and taste to record food knowledge communication in order to recall it more vividly when the time came to organize and analyze it using my field notes. The proximity to the research participants, being among them, moving alongside them (Pink, 2009, pp. 105-110) only deepened my awareness of their environment and of the ebbs and flows of their deliberate or unconscious communication. The repeated experience of specific aspects of food knowledge exchange and sustainability communication at different times of the day or on different occasions (e.g. on sunny versus rainy days, or during various phases in a crop’s growing cycle) added yet another layer of data
complexity to be recognized and collected through observation and interviews, as well as sensory memory.

**Ethical Considerations**

My research involved human subjects, so I completed the ethics review process through Royal Roads University’s Research Ethics Board. I abided by the Tri-Council Policies and obtained written consent from research participants (on paper or via e-mail), who were informed in person and via consent form of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

**Study Conduct**

There were two major phases in the conduct of my study: background research and fieldwork. The first phase took place in the winter and spring of 2013, when I scoured the Web for any information that could be useful for me to define the focus and scope of my study, as well as understand the physical and social context of my research, and identify key contacts and potential participants. I also visited several of the Edible Garden Project’s sharing gardens to view and photograph the spaces, and place myself within them as I began to assume my dual role of observer and participant. After having gone through the ethical review process, I reached out to the person who was the Edible Garden Project’s (EGP) manager and lead garden administrator at the time to make a first contact and arrange a meeting. I also contacted a member of the local Food Bank staff to obtain data on food aid need on Vancouver’s North Shore.

The first meeting that took place with the EGP’s overall manager that summer effectively marked the beginning of my fieldwork. I had initially planned to conduct my semi-constructed interviews with EGP staff and lead sharing garden volunteers first, transcribe and review my notes and then, armed with more knowledge, start to participate in the gardens to do my observation. However, it quickly became evident that jumping in and helping out was a more
effective way to not only gain access to the sites while the volunteers worked in them, but also place the data that I would be collecting via the interviews in context from the get-go. The EGP manager put me in contact with the organization’s community coordinator who became an invaluable source of information, facilitator and advocate for my research. With her help, I went through the security clearing process necessary to volunteer in the sharing gardens, met other EGP staff and volunteer gardeners, and was able to join group gardening sessions as well as attend a workshop at the Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre, one of EGP’s community partners. My network grew from there, as did the number of chances to gather the data necessary for me to reach my research goals.

**Data Analysis**

The first step in my analysis was to discern between emic (i.e., reflecting the views of the participants) and etic (my perceptions) data to get a more holistic understanding of the phenomena that I was researching (Creswell, 2013, p.96). Using sensory ethnography as my research strategy enriched that analysis because I was able to alter, expand and refocus my data collection on the spot. For example, a verbal exchange between garden members might have prompted me to take a photograph that illustrated communication tension and then inquire about what had occurred in a subsequent interview. It also made the analysis more complex because my interpretation of a sensory experience could have been different from that of the participants.

The next step was to code my data using both a framework chart (see fig. 1 below), a mechanism that helped me deconstruct the sharing garden experience into research themes (namely communication focused on food literacy and security, ecological and social sustainability, and food client dignity), and a concept map (see fig. 2 below, inspired by Smiciklas, 2012, p.39) that could demonstrate how all of these themes co-existed (Crang & Cook,
2007, pp. 140-146; Seale, 2012, pp. 366-392) in the communication that occurred in the sharing gardens and off-site through the networks to which the gardens were connected.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Literacy/Security</th>
<th>Sustainability</th>
<th>Food Client Dignity</th>
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<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Social</td>
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<td>Local needs</td>
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<td>Food pricing strategy</td>
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<td>Client feedback solicitation</td>
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*Figure 1. Sharing garden communication framework chart – primary and sub-themes*
Figure 2. Sharing garden network communication map
These analytical tools were highly useful in researching multiple sites using several methods of data collection. Even for one data collection method, such as photography, using thematic codes facilitated material grouping according to themes to show how they connected to inform my analysis of observed phenomena, and also how these evolved over time (see Appendix E). I then referred back to my initial research objectives to see how the coded data and my interpretation of them could help me meet them.

**Sprouting Knowledge: Food Literacy and Sustainability Nurtured in Sharing Gardens**

**Growing Food Is a Sensory Learning Experience**

Christine can no longer imagine eating produce that isn’t fresh and local, preferably straight from the garden. It isn’t surprising considering that she is the Edible Garden Project’s outgoing community coordinator and was until recently its lead sharing garden volunteer. She might have handed over her duties to Mary, a likeminded volunteer, to focus on the last stage of her pregnancy and her imminent motherhood, but her experience has definitely been committed to her sensory memory, as she alluded to during our interview at the project office in the basement of the North Shore Neighbourhood House.

Once you’ve tasted a carrot from the garden, you start kind of thinking, ‘What have I been eating?’ I think that’s sort of for me making that connection for people and having that shift in thinking about their food and…really attaching more value to their food. I think having the sharing gardens is amazing because of the learning opportunity with the community. For myself, it completely changed the way I looked at food. Once you sort of see that, you can’t really go back.

Before sharing garden volunteers get to taste test the produce that they grow, there is a lot of knowledge that they acquire and exchange about their group’s culture, the places that they
inhabit during group gardening sessions and the work they need to accomplish over a growing season, each phase soliciting all of their other senses—sight, hearing, smell, and touch. Instead of relying on a push learning system, in which experienced lead volunteers would solely provide a precise set of written and/or oral instructions to their crew prior to the gardening session so that they could later execute a plan, all members gather at the space and step into its localized culture. They come ready to collaborate, ask questions, identify challenges, come up with solutions, make mistakes, and most of all contribute their energy to moving their cause forward, namely growing food for their vulnerable neighbours. While the volunteers bring their own sets of gardening experience, skills, personality and motive for participation, they all have an equal chance to alert their senses to learning opportunities that lie in all aspects of growing food. This includes: 1) food literacy (e.g., the nutritional benefits of integrating fresh produce into one’s daily diet, the value of produce diversity, whether specific vegetables are best consumed raw or cooked, and how one goes about growing food in an urban setting), 2) ecological stewardship (e.g., the advantages of creating arable pieces of land, however small, in a city, how one can repurpose old tools and materials in a garden, and turning household organic waste into fertilizer that’s free of harmful chemicals), 3) social sustainability (e.g., how gardens create links between people across socio-economic groups, how working in a garden gives someone with mental health issues socialization opportunities, and how gardens level the playing field in terms of people’s access to food knowledge and avenues to apply it), and 4) the importance of food recipient dignity (e.g., why vegetable beds should be tidy, and selecting and harvesting produce with the goal of delivering high-quality products to aid recipients). Volunteers can see, hear, feel and smell the performance of this knowledge and its multiple outcomes (see figure 3 below).
Figure 3. Sharing garden sensory knowledge acquisition and communication model
Seeing Is Believing so that You Can Remember

The sense of sight tends to be the first one solicited. The volunteers see each other arrive to a gardening session, recall (for regular volunteers) or identify (for newcomers) the space, and visually reassemble their sharing garden culture. They assess the state of the garden, look for opportunities to (re)organize tools and supplies to optimize their productivity, and show each other how they work in the garden. Sight enables volunteers to “read each other’s moods and figure out who likes to do their own thing or work in teams,” as one participant said. It also helps in remembering what achieved goals look like (see image 2 below).

*Image 2. Ready to harvest – mature, shiny and appetizing-looking chard*

Hearing, Touching and Smelling to Learn, Practice and Understand

Like sight, the senses of hearing, touch and smell help volunteers more completely inhabit their group gardening experience. They can hear each other’s queries, instructions, tips, struggles, frictions, and words of support. They can literally smell the cycles of a food-growing garden—from the fresh soil that’s been laid in a bed to the aroma of a ripe tomato to the pungent
scent of a compost heap that needs to be turned over and aerated. They can also feel the wilt of a lettuce leaf and the dryness of neglected soil on their fingertips. All of these experiences are not only initiated and repeated in the sharing garden, but their sensory memory is also recalled every time the volunteers experience them in other life settings—while picking produce at a local farmer’s market or clearing out their fridge at home. That, in turn, enhances knowledge acquisition and retention.

**Sustainability in Action**

Ecological stewardship is an important aspect of the Edible Garden Project’s mandate, and it covers everything from sourcing eco-friendly materials to building composting facilities at every garden site to eliminate the need to buy fertilizer (see image 3 below).

*Image 3. Organic waste helps breathe life into vegetable gardens*
This stewardship is both performed by volunteers and encouraged in the larger community through spontaneous conversations with passersby and signage (see images 4 and 5 below).

*Image 4. The who, what, when, where and why of urban agriculture*
Image 5. EGP’s appeal to the community’s ecological and social sensibilities

In the gardens, volunteers are able to “dabble in sustainability,” as one volunteer noted, and practice adopting more ecologically mindful habits periodically before their value becomes more evident and they “have a chance to stick.” The small-scale production that occurs in the gardens also made me more aware of the immediate impact that I could have on my local food system, of my ability to be a meaningful producer, in purpose if not in size. Entering a new culture like that of an ecolocalist (Curtis, 2003, p.84) volunteer can be daunting, but the garden eases that process.

Sharing Gardens Bind Community Actors and Blend Identities to Foster Dignity

The sharing garden volunteers refer to the North Shore residents who get the food that they grow for them not as the needy or food aid recipients, as I would have thought, but as their clients. That was what I perceived to be a strong and overt commitment to seeking a new kind of
social dynamic through the gardens. Vulnerable residents are positioned as people who have access to essential products and services, not as people seeking perpetual handouts. The North Shore Food Bank’s decision to deliver food weekly in a retail store-like environment (in the North Shore Neighbourhood House’s multi-purpose room) and require clients to purchase their produce, be it at a very low price (e.g., 50¢ for leeks, 25¢ for a bunch of kale or $1 for a squash), reinforces that peer-to-peer notion, which is important to foster dignity in a society where need carries a lot of stigma, as Edible Garden Project manager Emily pointed out: “I think that there’s still a lot of shame around [need]. Not everybody, but there are people who will come to the food bank with big glasses, [and] scarves around their hair. They don’t want to be seen or recognized.” Christine echoed those words and spoke of the real impact that the food hub had had, recalling a food client who had appeared in The Early Edition, a CBC newscast:

> She’s like our biggest customer. She buys so much stuff. They interviewed her and she was saying how much she’s appreciated having access [to the hub] because she has children. Being able to provide them with meals containing vegetables, she says it’s made a huge difference to her, not only the health of her children, but also how she feels as a mother. It’s awesome.

Besides the inclusive language and physical environment at the Food Bank food hub, volunteers in sharing gardens encourage each other to care for the plots properly so that they always project a positive image of not only themselves and the Edible Garden Project and its staff, but also the food clients. In their own way, the volunteers treat the gardens as a form of collective public face for the clients, so the gardens provoke face-to-face encounters between the community and the clients that shatter stereotypical views of aid recipients as being poorly groomed, lacking pride and therefore being relegated to “them, not us” status. Dignity, like food
knowledge and sustainability, can also be visually communicated. It is a task that the volunteers undertake individually in the work that they do during their gardening sessions and as a group when they set their operational guidelines (see images 6 and 7 below).

*Image 6. A volunteer tackles a major sharing garden cleanup*

*Image 7. Clear paths, tidy beds and mulched soil communicate pride and dignity*
Performed Communication In-situ and Off-site Links Actions to Community Goals and Values

Sustainability journeys are by definition transitions from one level of awareness and action to another. The Edible Garden Project’s sharing gardens serve as mini-cultural settings where such transitions occur for both the volunteers within them and the community in which they are located. Former volunteer coordinator Christine has witnessed this first-hand in the District of West Vancouver, one of Vancouver’s three North Shore municipalities:

I’ve done a few events there and just when I tell [people] about a sharing garden, you know someone donating their backyard, they’re like, “What? Strangers come to your backyard?” I’m like yes, that’s the idea and it does work quite well. It’s just a different concept for a lot of people there and…it’s just something that many people never really thought about.

As EGP manager Emily noted, it makes the project’s purpose that much clearer.

I think in a lot of ways we’re just a place of inspiration. We’re demonstrating what can be done. Our sharing gardens, they are in all sorts of different places and spaces on purpose so we can show people, yeah it’s possible to [grow food] on a strata property or on a rooftop, or it’s possible to do this in a public park or in a community garden or in your front yard, or in your backyard or on your boulevard.

So even though you don’t necessarily talk about them as demonstration areas and that it’s for that purpose, they are.

In these small “arenas of development” (Jorgensen, 2012), by virtue of the sharing garden volunteers’ actions, communication about food literacy, ecological and social sustainability, and
food client dignity is effectively taking place (Ziemann, 2011, p. 89). The gardens, therefore, become at once a locus of and vehicle for communication (see figure 4 below).
Figure 4. The sharing garden as a locus of and vehicle for food literacy and sustainability communication
Discussion

Local Organic Production by Any Other Name

Permaculture by definition assumes a symbiotic relationship between human actors and their natural habitat, so it is no wonder that discourse surrounding this agricultural system typically includes such buzzwords as “organic.” Yet, as permaculture advocates, Edible Garden Project volunteers make little use of the term when working and communicating with each other in sharing gardens. It is as though situating their sites within the current sustainability discourse is not a set priority. Rather, sustainability communication is about the experience of what are essentially applied organic agriculture principles, regardless of whether or not the practice meets every criterion necessary for the product thereof to officially be labeled as organic. The product of the volunteers’ labour is not packaged into standardized containers with labels or branding of any kind; it is shared in bulk without concern for the type of market competition that is integral to for-profit food production and distribution. Communication within the sharing gardens, therefore, is focused on building a collaborative community and on the elements that represent the essence of the food that is produced, some of which are also markers of what is commonly identified as local organic produce—its freshness, untainted nature, nutritional value, local production, variety and accessibility.

Within the context of the sharing gardens, the terms “organic” and “local” are not pronounced to evaluate modes of production and the results thereof as if these were removed from community members’ daily life and belonged to someone else. Their meaning is performed to demonstrate that food production is woven into a shared human, community-anchored experience. As Vancouver-based urban agriculture advocate Peter Ladner notes, “Many cities are blurring the boundary line that used to dictate that food is grown ‘out there’ and eaten ‘in here,’
give or take a few backyard gardens.” When this line dissolves and urban dwellers’ food is produced where it is consumed, an opportunity arises to gain a spatial perspective on where/how societies and economies transition toward sustainable modes of production and consumption (Coenen, Benneworth & Truffer, 2012). The sustainability communication that occurs verbally and through the performance of food production tasks in sharing gardens therefore becomes a useful indicator of a broader society’s transition journey, along with the challenges that it faces and opportunities that lie ahead.

Moving the Market Goal Post: Access among New Economic Performance Parameters

Like Shane and Graedel, Edible Garden Project’s sharing garden volunteers have developed their own markers of not only activity, but also performance. For them, giving vulnerable residents on Vancouver’s North Shore more direct and reliable access to fresh produce, both in terms of physical proximity and affordability, is the return that they seek for their investment of time and resources. Their performance matrix is akin to that of a social enterprise, with one difference: it factors in ongoing response to local need, not the creation of product demand (e.g., through advertising or branding deals) or market-share gains on the competition. One of their underlying principles is community collaboration, as Edible Garden Project manager Emily noted:

If you zoom out a little and look at the community food organizations or any organization delivering food programs on the whole North Shore, it’s a very collaborative environment and network. We all work very hard not to duplicate or not to step on each other’s toes or to compete; we complement [each other]. The door is always open to have these conversations and figure out how we can
leverage each other’s strengths to make [things] better as a whole, which I think is very valuable and is not something that’s true for every community.

These are foretelling signs of the silver lining that Balascu spots in the planet’s increasingly urbanized future:

We must imagine the cities of tomorrow starting now. We must integrate in their design not only our environmental concerns but also our human dimension and moral concerns. Maybe the very “design” of the “sustainable/green economy” should be built on the possibility of life with no economic growth. And it should definitely reintroduce ethical concerns (included but not limited to ecology) and un-commodified emotions into the measurement that indicates performance.

I Think, therefore We Are: Individual Mindfulness Helps Reshape the Community Concept

Members of a community, however tightly bound, do not co-exist in a vacuum. There are outside forces, such as local and national government policies that can have a significant impact on their relations and how power is shared among them. These forces can also affect how individuals position themselves within that context, which in turn influences how they might evaluate what Chang refers to as the cost of shifting to a more flattened sustainability model (p. 237).

In its best practice, the mutually reinforcing relationship between natural capital and social capital leads to “killing two birds with one stone,” as well as an increase in capital for future production, for a community. This result may serve as a stimulant to discussions on an alternative to the conventional development path (Chang, 2010). While considering putting this mutual reinforcement into
practice, one should be aware of what might be sacrificed: individual values, to a certain extent, and possible harm to other forms of social capital.

Edible Garden Project volunteers actually do not reject individual values. In fact, they celebrate the pursuit of an internalized sustainability experience and support each other to shape that experience so that it can meet individual needs, such as developing leadership skills and learning the specific techniques that they wish to apply in their own personal gardens. But they remain conscious of their common sharing garden goal, which is to serve the community. If one considers the familiar Maslow pyramid that represents how human beings instinctively move through the stages of meeting a sequence of needs—physiological, safety, social, esteem, self-actualization—then one could say that Edible Garden Project volunteers see themselves as moving up that pyramid as their vulnerable neighbours do, even if they and their clients are out of step. So the garden volunteers’ contributions are not seen as pure sacrifices, but as community investments. Such collaborative local economics offer alternatives to balance-of-power focused systems that have historically represented the organization of global economies and in which one economic actor’s gain is another’s loss in a perpetual sum-zero game (Sens & Stoett, 2010, p.70).

**Beyond the Physical Space: Exploring Virtual Connections Among Grassroots Actors**

Taking into consideration that the current communication that occurs off-site is relatively low-tech when it comes to operating sharing gardens individually and collectively, even if the Edible Garden Project as a whole does use the Web and social media consistently, how would things change if more of the latest technology were introduced? Would it enhance or hinder on-site communication and the volunteers’ reliance on multisensory transfer of information? This was discussed at a recent sharing garden planning meeting when a volunteer introduced to us an online tool that she uses to keep track of her work. Some volunteers welcomed the idea, while
others were not so quick to warm up to it, visibly curious but apprehensive of how it might change their individual gardening experience and their ability to control it to a certain extent. If technology is eventually introduced in the gardens’ regular processes, it would open up an avenue for further research into the parallel that might exist between the multisensory experience of a natural environment like a sharing garden and that of multimedia, all in the context of food literacy and sustainability communication.

Conclusion

It’s been eight years since Vancouver Coastal Health formally identified food security as a gap on its city’s North Shore, leading to the creation of the Edible Garden Project (EGP). Since then, EGP staff and sharing garden volunteers have dedicated their time and efforts to producing food for their vulnerable neighbours as both a sign of solidarity and the articulation of the value that they place on ecological and social sustainability. 2013 marked the first year that the group’s gardens have had stable, predictable production, a sign that EGP had matured from a grassroots, last-resort aid mechanism to what could potentially become a viable ecolocal food production system. It has been a transition journey toward sustainability that has given EGP volunteers the multisensory experience of being community development actors who produce and share knowledge, and witness the impact of the tasks that they perform. They are about to further refine and add yet another layer of complexity to their food literacy and sustainability communication with the launch of EGP’s newly established Multi-Herb Culture Garden, a project run at the Queen Mary sharing garden in collaboration with the North Shore Multicultural Society, with funding from the Vancouver Foundation.

The project will see North Shore residents with diverse cultural backgrounds work together to plan, design, build and manage the herb garden to grow herbs and spices that are
consumed around the globe, from China to Iran. The idea behind it is for the Edible Garden Project to run a garden whose participants better reflect the North Shore’s cultural mosaic—back in 2011, approximately one-quarter of Vancouver’s North Shore residents entered a non-official language as their mother tongue on that year’s Census, and the region has experienced significant growth ever since, particularly in its Persian, Chinese, Korean and Filipino cultural communities (North Shore Multicultural Society, 2014).

However communication evolves within the Edible Garden Project’s sharing gardens, the work that volunteers perform there will likely be needed for some time to come. While Vancouver continues to grab headlines for its high liveability rankings, the Food Bank hub opens every Wednesday to serve eager clients at the North Shore Neighbourhood House.
References


provisional set. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, 43*(5), 643-663.


COMMUNITY GARDEN PROJECT
Looking for volunteers to take part in a study on food literacy programs delivered in urban farms and community gardens

Study Name: Seeds of Sustainability – Food Literacy in Urban Farms & Community Gardens

The Researcher: My name is Myriam Beaugé. I am a graduate student in the School of Communication & Culture at Royal Roads University (Victoria, B.C.). I am conducting a research study on food literacy as part of the requirements of my Masters degree in Intercultural and International Communication, and I would like to invite you to participate.

Purpose of the Research: I am studying how people are teaching and acquiring food literacy skills in urban farms and community gardens. If you decide to participate, we will discuss why you chose to join this community garden, what your experience here has been like, and what part you believe the garden's programs play in overall community health/safety and sustainable urban development.

The Details: The meeting will take place at the community garden at a mutually agreed upon time, and will be in the form of an informal interview that should last about two hours. I will gather data through the interview, photography, multimedia (audio/video) and handwritten notes.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with your community garden, or any member thereof. In the event that you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed.

Confidentiality: All information that you supply during the research will be held in confidence and, unless you specifically authorize it in your consent, your name, as well as identifiable photographs or videoclips, will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Your data will be safely stored on a password-protected external computer drive, and only research staff will have access to this information. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, Royal Roads University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

The Findings: I will present the study findings in both thesis and digital publication formats. All study participants will receive a copy of those reports.

The Perks: As a thank-you for your participation in the study, I will offer you refreshments during our interview at the community garden.

Interested? Please contact researcher Myriam Beaugé by telephone at [redacted], or by e-mail at myriambeauge@gmail.com.
Appendix B – Consent Form

MYRIAM BEAUGÉ
Graduate Student
School of Communication and Culture, Royal Roads University

Dear Madam/Sir,

I would like to invite you to participate to a social scientific study on food literacy. The goal of my research is to observe and understand how people teach and acquire food literacy skills in community gardens, and what part culture plays in those experiences.

My plan is to schedule an informal one-on-one interview that would take approximately two hours of your time and be focused on your experience at the community garden and with its food literacy program.

My hope is that this study will help raise awareness of how community-based food literacy programs relate to overall community health/safety and sustainable urban consumption. To facilitate this, I will present the research findings both in article format to academic journals and in digital magazine format (i.e., including articles and photographs, as well as audio and video content) to online multimedia publications. You would receive a copy of my findings in both formats.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and unpaid, and you may choose to stop participating at any time, for any reason. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with your community garden or the members thereof. In the event that you withdraw from the study, all data collected that links you to the study will be immediately destroyed.

If you decide to participate in this research, I will take notes during our interview or, if you agree, record our conversation so that I can more easily refer back to the information later. If you are interested in being featured in the digital magazine, then you can provide consent for our interview to be videotaped. You will also decide if you would like our interview to be entirely confidential (in which case I would use a fictitious name for you when I present my research findings), or if you are comfortable being identified (I would then use your real name).

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact research supervisor Prof. Phillip Vannini of Royal Roads University either by telephone at [redacted], or by e-mail at [redacted].

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this project, please contact Colleen Hoppins, Research Ethics
Coordinator, Royal Roads University, by telephone at 250-391-2600, extension 4206 or via e-mail at Colleen.Hoppins@RoyalRoads.ca.

I __________________________ consent to participate in the Seeds of Sustainability study conducted by Myriam Beaugé. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

I allow the researcher, Myriam Beaugé (please check all that applies):

To use my true name □

To photograph my image □

To record my voice □

To record my image on video □

Signature: __________________________ Date: __________________________

Name: __________________________ Contact (if you wish to be notified): __________________________
Appendix C – Sample Questions for Semi-Constructed Interview

The researcher posed these initial questions during interviews with Christine Hardie, the outgoing community coordinator for the Edible Garden Project (EGP). Hardie was previously a nurse working with diabetic patients before redirecting her career focus and joining EGP.

1. **Background information**
   - How did you get involved in this type of work?
   - Which part of the (sustainable agriculture) program attracted you the most?

2. **Food literacy**
   - When you were working in nursing, where did you find the biggest gap was in terms of people’s knowledge of food?
   - Can you explain why we find healthy food so complicated to approach?
   - Do you think there’s a lot of info out there about the real cost of healthy food?
   - If you relate this to the Edible Garden Project, where do you think it fits in that puzzle?

3. **Experience of working in community sharing gardens and Loutet Farm**
   - Tell me about this place.
   - How do you see this program growing?

4. **Connection between sharing gardens and the North Shore Food Bank’s weekly food hub**
   - How does the food hub work? Do you man your own table there?
   - When you do interact with food recipients, is it about health, is it about the enjoyment of food, or where the food comes from? Perhaps a combination? How do you communicate that?

5. **Food sovereignty and food recipient dignity**
   - Have food hub clients said anything about that change to being able to pick what they want, and being able to purchase certain things at a lower price?
   - Are any food recipients ever involved as Edible Garden Project volunteers?
1. Making room for a sharing vegetable garden

2. Six yards of soil fill up the beds
Appendix D – Researcher’s Home-Based Sharing Garden Images

3. From pea seeds to seedlings: the first signs of life

4. Liking the soil: early pea shoots
5. Mesclun lettuce (top) and potatoes (above) soon to be harvested