

Growing, Sustainably: Community Garden Initiatives in Libraries

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Executive Summary

This paper seeks to address the institutional relationships between libraries and community gardens, with the purpose of building on community efforts to create spaces where sustainable gardening practices can be shared, promoted, and practiced in the public setting. This paper attempts to share the work being done by librarians in transforming facilities to incorporate garden spaces, and connecting library users to community gardening organizations, and programs. In synthesizing the various benefits and challenges experienced by libraries implementing community garden initiatives, the goal of this paper is to present sustainable guidelines and practices for future institutions. In addition, this paper attempts to define key areas where libraries can intervene in tying environmental information literacy to the project of building sites of community production and sustenance.

Introduction

The mission to make libraries “green” has been undertaken by information professionals as a necessary movement towards developing sustainable resources, practices, and grounds. This paper takes up the call for “greening” the library quite literally. Community gardens present a cohabited space of production, where sustainable living practices are enacted in its development and maintenance. Many libraries have been taking initiative in fostering these spaces, such that the American Library Association has devoted press to the kinship between librarianship and gardening.¹ As libraries work to assess their own environmental impact and standardize sustainable practices, it is vital that sustainability initiatives address not only sustaining the institution, but also its communities of users. The contemporary public library inhabits a unique and contested space where individuals, communities, and organizations can acquire access to crucial, environmental information.²

Addressing collaborations between community gardening organizations, library staff, and facilities is always a negotiation of the many factors of scale, scope, and funding that will shape a gardening project. In recognizing the many challenges that face both libraries and gardens, there is potential in finding partnerships where sustainable practices can work in tandem, to serve both the institution and its communities.

The Many Benefits of Library Gardens

This section collects and coheres a variety of case studies into actionable items that may be leveraged when advocating for a community garden initiative. Most importantly, such initiatives can be dynamically adjusted to fit the particular needs of the user communities, and

¹ Banks, Carrie Scott, and Cindy Mediavilla. 2019. Libraries & gardens: growing together.

² Feldstein, Sarah. 1996. “Expanding the Capacity of the Public Library: Partnerships with Community Based Environmental Groups.” *Electronic Green Journal* 1 (6). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3636x9pd>.

the capacity of the library.³ As outlined here, there are numerous benefits to consider when introducing gardening opportunities to the library grounds.

Foremost to establishing a community garden is to recognize their potential value in combatting food insecurity and providing an infrastructure for community sustenance. Gardens that can accommodate food production offer users access to self-grown produce, as well as an economic return for their labor.⁴ This can be vital in urban areas and food deserts, where access to organic and nutritional foods is limited.⁵ At the Olympia Timberland Library in Washington, raised-bed gardens were built and maintained in partnership with a non-profit organization and a nearby homeless shelter, resulting in a multilateral effort to provide avenues of access to sustainable, locally-sourced foods.⁶ Libraries near agricultural zones are opportune areas to build networks between farmers and library users, as in the case of McQuade Library in Massachusetts, where a community supported agriculture (CSA) program was engineered to contribute to local food relief efforts.⁷ Beyond the realm of sustenance, gardens present net health benefits in reducing stress and providing spaces of healing for patrons and communities who have experienced trauma, growing individual and communal capacity for resilience.⁸

³ Wilkins Jordan, Mary, Dudley, Michael Q., ed. "Public Library Gardens: Playing a role in ecologically sustainable communities." *Public libraries and resilient cities*. American Library Association, 2013.

⁴ Flachs, Andrew. 2010. "Food For Thought: The Social Impact of Community Gardens in the Greater Cleveland Area." *Electronic Green Journal* 1 (30).

⁵ Alaimo, Katherine, Elizabeth Packnett, Richard A. Miles, and Daniel J. Kruger. 2008. "Fruit and Vegetable Intake among Urban Community Gardeners." *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 40 (2): 94. The results of this study outline: "Adults with a household member who participated in a community garden consumed fruits and vegetables 1.4 more times per day than those who did not participate, and they were 3.5 times more likely to consume fruits and vegetables at least 5 times daily."

⁶ Feddern, Donna. "Community Garden Engages Homeless Patrons and Non-Profit Neighbors." *Washington Library Association*.

⁷ Wong, Catherine, and Kathryn Geoffrion Scannell. 2016. "Don't Panic, It's Organic*: Supporting Sustainable Agriculture and Hunger Relief Efforts at McQuade Library." *2016 ACRL/NEC Annual Conference- Holistic Librarianship: Broad Thinking for Diverse and Creative Solutions*, May.

⁸ Okvat, Heather A., and Alex J. Zautra. 2014. "Sowing Seeds of Resilience: Community Gardening in a Post-Disaster Context." In *Greening in the Red Zone: Disaster, Resilience and Community Greening*, edited by Keith G. Tidball and Marianne E Krasny, 73–90. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Community gardens, like libraries, are foundational sites of community coherence. In addressing the sustainability of the library's communities, information professionals should not only be working to create accessible pathways to information, but also accessible spaces that foster a sense of belonging.⁹ Acknowledging that gardening practices are inflected by cultural and environmental contexts, community identity can be forged in developing a relationship to the earth.¹⁰ Where the privatization of public urban space is endemic in many cities, public gardens present a space where local control can be negotiated and managed by the community.¹¹ Supporting urban green spaces is a necessary project for libraries to undertake in serving a diverse array of user communities, especially those most effected by social and economic marginalization. Gardens offer the potential to expand the sensorial experience of the library, creating an accessible and welcoming space for users who may not have previously accommodated by learning environments.¹² Indeed, interactive spaces expand the library's capacity to address the needs of a more diverse user-base, and can even be vital spaces to support community-formed networks, including environmental activist and advocacy groups.¹³

Designing green spaces in the library has direct, positive impacts on the local environmental quality, which lead to indirect impacts on the broader environment. There is evidence to support adopting "green roofs" or rooftop gardens as an effective strategy to mitigate

⁹ Barbakoff, Audrey, and Brett Barbakoff. "Building on Green: Sustainable Thinking Goes Beyond Green to Unite Library Space and Community." In *Greening Libraries*, vol. 225, no. 240, pp. 225-240. Litwin Books in association with GSE Research, 2012.

¹⁰ Klindienst, Patricia. 2006. *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*. Beacon Press.

¹¹ Smith, Christopher M., and Hilda E. Kurtz. 2003. "Community Gardens and Politics of Scale in New York City*." *Geographical Review* 93 (2): 193–212.

¹² Banks & Mediavilla. 38.

¹³ Feldstein, Sarah. 1996. "Expanding the Capacity of the Public Library: Partnerships with Community Based Environmental Groups." *Electronic Green Journal* 1 (6).

building energy consumption and broader carbon sequestration efforts.¹⁴ Garden implementation can be flexibly adapted to fit local environmental needs: where rainfall is abundant, gardens can reduce runoff and aid water recycling practices, while in hotter climates, “vertical gardens” or living walls can contribute to cooling effects and fighting the “urban heat island” effect.¹⁵ In addressing efficient energy and resource management practices, libraries have utilized gardens to achieve higher scoring LEED certification.¹⁶ While this should not be the only metric of standard for a library’s sustainable facilities, it is an effective tool in communicating environmental needs and investing in sustainable spaces.

Most pertinent to the issues of librarianship is the need for increased need for advocacy and work around environmental information literacy. Many libraries have used gardens to facilitate programming situated around environmental learning, which may span a wide range of age groups and topics, from STEM learning to ethnobotanical practice.¹⁷ There is a myriad opportunity in forging these community relationships, as gardening education programs can offer a venue for librarians to demonstrate sustainable practices, distribute environmental information resources, and on some level, contribute to the very maintenance of the garden. For example, the Sam J. Racadio Library & Environmental Learning Center used their garden as a space to teach users about native plants and composting practices.¹⁸ Librarians and educators can use more engaging spaces to develop their own environmental resources and networks; the process of

¹⁴ Shafique, Muhammad, Xiaolong Xue, and Xiaowei Luo. 2019. “An Overview of Carbon Sequestration of Green Roofs in Urban Areas.” *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, November, 126515.

¹⁵ Banks & Mediavilla. 51-53.

¹⁶ Ibid. 51-53.

¹⁷ Ibid. 26-28.

¹⁸ Wilkins Jordan.

funding and programming the garden can stimulate local connections, bringing local government and organizational resources to users attention.¹⁹

Information professionals should not view the implementation of a community garden as divergent from efforts to make LIS practices more sustainable, but rather see how it actively contributes to an institution's culture and practice of sustainability and lifelong learning.

Challenges and Considerations

As with any sustainability-driven initiative, there are numerable challenges to consider before designing a library garden initiative. The scope, size, and organizational agenda of the garden should be built reflexively depending on local environment, community needs, availability and access to funding, and projective labor and resource. The following section details generalized issues drawn from particular scenarios, with particular solutions that may be widely-applicable.

The issue of funding will often make or break the viability of developing a library garden initiative, and so it is of great value to begin undertaking a garden project by not only assessing sources of potential funding, but to also establish connections with local partners. While budgetary shortages plague library administration and staff,²⁰ gathering monetary support will most likely come from outside sources. Most library gardens are established primarily and initially through grant-funding, but additional sources may be needed to cover annual operational costs.²¹ The Pottsboro Area Public Library in Texas experienced a spike in city funding after the implementation of a community garden, which was initially funded through a mix of public and

¹⁹ Feldstein.

²⁰ Feldstein. 6.

²¹ Banks & Mediavilla. 70-72.

private grants.²² The flexibility of community gardens is an asset when grant-writing, where sponsor goals can be met with tangible developments in the functional space of the garden.²³ Fund-raising projects and donations are potential sources of support, but fluctuations in that support might result in instability. Building connections with local community gardens, environmental advocacy groups, and businesses can be pivotal in amassing resources, guidance, and participants.

Getting a gardening project off the ground requires the upkeep, maintenance, and nurturing attention of the gardeners who will tend it. This means a community garden should have an organizational plan for facilitating the involvement of participants and defining their roles accordingly. When assessing the garden's scope, one should determine if it is within the library's capacity to hire a garden manager and coordinator. While many library gardens rely on volunteers formed of staff and community members,²⁴ high volunteer turnover may affect participation rates and continual upkeep of the garden grounds.²⁵ Securing partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies can provide incentives to ensure the commitment of participants and provide access to skilled volunteer pools, such as the Master Gardeners and Cooperative Extension programs run through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.²⁶ A truly sustainable garden will reward its gardeners for their labor, by developing workshops and classes that allow garden participants to foster new skills and even open up career opportunities through certifications.²⁷ During the school year, inviting classes to participate in the garden is a great way

²² Programming Librarian. "Growing Your Library's Role: Creating a Community Garden with Impact - YouTube." May 2, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJF7HcYEH04>.

²³ Ibid. YouTube.

²⁴ Wilkins Jordan. 104.

²⁵ Laycock Pedersen, Rebecca, Zoe P. Robinson, and Emma Surman. 2019. "Understanding Transience and Participation in University Student-Led Food Gardens." *Sustainability* 11 (10): 2788.

²⁶ Banks & Mediavilla. 77.

²⁷ Edwards, Julie Biando, Melissa S. Robinson, and Kelley Rae Unger. 2013. *Transforming Libraries, Building Communities: The Community-Centered Library*. Scarecrow Press. 148-149.

to use curricular tie-ins to both educate and maintain the grounds.²⁸ Facilitating the garden's functional operations and upkeep takes communication as well, to confirm that library administration, staff, and building facilities workers are aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the garden.

The maintenance of garden grounds is tied to the library's geographic environment, as seasonal changes and boundaries of property ownership will necessarily limit the scope and size of the garden. Because gardens will require use of library grounds, locating a site Among the many priorities of facilities access to consider, access to water is crucial when choosing a space for the garden. In the unfortunate case of Zion-Benton Library in Illinois, the nearest water spigot was located on the opposite side of the building.²⁹ Libraries that do not have outdoor space for maintaining a garden can still participate in greening their community by creating indoor potted gardens, or establishing seed and tool libraries.³⁰ Accessibility of the gardening facilities and flexibility of its use should also be an area of concern when selecting a garden site and when establishing standard gardening practices. Ensuring safe and sustainable garden practices requires creating library policies and guidelines that outline restrictions of use, i.e. how the garden is to be shared, what organic materials can be used, and what types of plants are allowed.³¹ Standardizing resource and waste management practices are important facets of sustainable gardening, and can assure that sustainably sourced materials are being used. Training library staff to abide by standard gardening practices can be a useful opportunity to build understanding of LEED certification requirements and sustainable building management.³²

²⁸ Lynch, Grace Hwang. "Dig It! Library Gardens Sprout Up Coast-to-Coast." *School Library Journal*. <https://www.slj.com?detailStory=dig-it-libraries-are-creating-gardens-to-expand-their-mission>.

²⁹ Wilkins Jordan. 107.

³⁰ Banks & Mediavilla. 35-38.

³¹ *Ibid.* 58-59.

³² Barnes, Laura L. "Green Buildings as Sustainability Education Tools," August 2012.

Measuring the impact of gardening initiatives can be conducted both through quantitative metrics of use and harvest output, and qualitative methods of conducting surveys, interviews and garden observation.³³ With this data, the garden's policies and operation can be adapted to fit the updated needs of its users. Environmental education is an ongoing process, and education efforts do not only apply to library patrons but also to information professionals. Recognizing that the goals of sustainability at the library go beyond individual actions and institutional metrics will allow for more productive conversations and dynamic projects. Implementing library gardens is one tool in the librarian's sustainability toolkit, and a necessary one to consider in providing effective, meaningful services for the library's user communities.

Recommendations

In outlining the many benefits and challenges libraries face when creating community gardens, these generalized guidelines and action-points are proposed for ensuring a successful and sustainable garden initiative:

- Assess particular needs of library patrons and wider communities as they reflect the particulars of the library's geographical environment and resource capacity
- Build connections with potential partners, determine what gaps in resource can be filled, and communicate community needs
- Address sources of funding for ongoing maintenance and develop organizational structure for participating gardeners and/or site coordinators
- Design to fit the limitations of the library facilities or environment, with an eye for flexibility in the case of future expansion or adaptation
- Plan community events and educational programming to put the garden to use

³³ Banks & Mediavilla. 88.

- Evaluate overall impact on library/garden users and modify guidelines where appropriate

The overall success of a sustainable library garden will be determined by the community's investment and use of the resources. Libraries are foundational spaces to assemble resources and foster the community connections necessary for building an active community garden. As communities are invariably affected by the accelerating changes in climate, building productive centers of interdependence and resilience will be crucial to living sustainably.³⁴ The potential and power of collaborations between libraries and community gardens reflect a wider need for active, public spaces of convergence, where community education and production go hand-in-hand. Librarians and information professionals are in strategic positions to organize these spaces, responsibly, in hopes that they will grow towards a more sustainable future.

³⁴ Wilkins Jordan.

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