“Not Just a Passing Fancy”
How Community Gardens Contribute to Healthy and Inclusive Neighbourhoods

REGION OF WATERLOO PUBLIC HEALTH

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Judy, Ellen, and Kevan
Executive Summary

The Community Gardening Storytelling Project provides a vivid picture of how community gardening has become a valuable health promoting and community building activity that, as one gardener explained, “is more than a passing fancy”. Community gardening is an inexpensive and effective way to reach a number of public health goals and support several Regional initiatives. Community gardens are a valuable tool in creating high quality urban and rural gathering spaces and supporting people’s efforts to stay healthy.

In this community gardening storytelling project, 84 gardeners participated in unstructured ethnographic interviews through which the meaning of gardening in their lives emerged from the stories they told. Their stories revealed eight main reasons for gardening which were grouped into three themes. Nine stories were highlighted and written up as profiles (see Appendix One) and three videos were produced – one for each theme. Profiles are found throughout this report and the videos are available on the Region of Waterloo’s YouTube channel.

The first theme to emerge was health. For some people, gardening helped to address mental stress. Stories included insightful anecdotes about mental health which included the role of gardening in abating current stress and also in healing past trauma or anxiety. Health benefits also included physical activity and increased consumption of healthy food due to ease of availability. Stories included children and adults eating more produce and eating more or different parts of the plant. While many gardeners commented on the financial benefit of growing vegetables and fruits, some gardened specifically to save money on food. Community gardens help Public Health reach its mandate of working with community partners to promote healthy eating, physical activity, and good mental health.

The second theme was inclusion. The Community Garden Storytelling Project suggests Community gardens lend themselves to the inclusion of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, ages, income levels, and needs. The theme of inclusion emerged from participant’s comments about community building, involving children, and preserving culture. Community building happens when people connect over a common activity and build a personal social network. It happens when people organize themselves and work together to create and maintain a garden. It also happens when attitudes and prejudices are challenged and communities experience greater cohesion. Stories from gardeners illustrate these community building activities. Gardeners mentioned the importance of involving children as a way to spend time with them and have them appreciate food. Lastly, some gardeners mentioned that community garden plots contributed to preserving culture, by maintaining the traditional foods, skills, and language that linked them with their birth country or that of their parents. Community garden supports the Region’s Diversity and Inclusion strategy – which aims to “create inclusive programs and services that meet the needs of our growing and changing community”. They are environments where people’s skills are valued and shared – in spite of differences.

The third theme was learning. Community gardeners may start by learning how to grow a few vegetables but this quickly spreads to a curiosity about the cultivation of other vegetables or fruits,
how to prepare or preserve the fresh fruits and vegetables, and numerous other environmental
issues. Knowledge leads to greater understanding but also to more questions; consequently it
tended to raise both respect for farmers and concern about the environment and issues in the food
system. Participants often spoke passionately about the greater sense of control and confidence
that gardening had brought them. They expressed excitement and pride about the rewards of their
labour and learning. The learning which happens at community gardens supports one goal of the
Waterloo Region Food system Roundtable – which is to work towards giving people greater
knowledge about, engagement in, and control over the food in our communities.

Gardeners spoke about the elements necessary for a garden to thrive such as support for garden
infrastructure, leadership and cooperation. The report concludes by listing some strategies
gardeners thought would support the growth of community gardens in Waterloo Region.

This is an exciting time for community gardens in Waterloo Region. The Region of Waterloo and
area municipalities have permissive land use policies with respect to community gardens. The
demand for and interest in community garden plots is high – evidenced by many gardens with
waiting lists. The time is ripe to foster a “culture of community gardens” in Waterloo Region that
can build on permissive land use policies to embrace a full range of policies and practices that
enable and support the growth of community gardens. Policies and practices that encourage and
advocate for community gardens would allow more residents of Waterloo Region to experience the
benefits of health, inclusion, and learning.
Introduction

This report is built upon stories of community gardening in Waterloo Region as told by gardeners themselves. They collectively speak for the power of this community-based activity, and propose ways to move it forward.

Over the past decades, food gardens have reappeared into urban and rural spaces – sometimes in the form of community gardens. The shift of food production from the back yard to the proud centerpiece of urban green spaces is significant, because benefits emerged that go far beyond their historical role of food provision. Community gardens, we are discovering through research such as this, represent a new appreciation of visible, central spaces that serve as opportunities for meeting neighbours, for cultural inclusion, for cross-generational interaction, for discovering the origins of food, and for elevating the tasks of producing and preserving food to a worthy and respected status. Community gardening can be taken on by anyone, no matter who they are and where they live.

Public Health has provided staff support to community gardens since 1999. A considerable amount of research has been done on the benefits of community gardens during the past decade. As a whole, it clearly reveals benefits of health, food security, social interaction, economic development, education, crime prevention, recreation, cultural expression, and community organization (Draper, 2010). In 2012, Public Health completed its first formal evaluation of community gardens. The benefits documented in this study are consistent with those mentioned, but were derived from the unique perspective of gardeners’ voices in Waterloo Region. Thus, this study provides a vivid picture of how community gardening has become a valuable health promoting and community building activity that is, as one gardener explained, “more than a passing fancy”.

Establishing an effective community garden is not an easy task. It requires considerable organization, planning, cooperation, perseverance, and resources. The rewards, as this study shows, are enhanced citizen engagement and strengthened communities – hallmarks of a healthy community.

Community Gardens in Waterloo Region

Waterloo Region is fertile ground for community gardens as indicated by the timeline shown in Appendix Two. Public Health has provided half time staff support to the Community Garden Network since 1999. There are currently over 1200 plots in total and many gardens continue to have a waiting list (See Appendix Three). While the first community gardens in Waterloo Region were started in the 1970s, the number of community gardens grew significantly in number from 31 to 53 between 2005 and 2012. This growth was due to the combined efforts of many community partners, local municipal governments and the Region of Waterloo. A community capacity builder was hired 2008. This position was funded when the Community Garden Council and Public Health

1 Disclaimer: The quotes used in this document contain the opinions of the gardeners interviewed and may not reflect the opinion of Public Health or the Community Garden Council.
joined with Opportunities Waterloo Region to form the Diggable Communities Collaborative – allowing them to apply for funding from the Trillium Foundation, and resulting in significant expansion.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gather and synthesize information from the perspective and experience of diverse community gardeners in Waterloo Region, to:

(a) document the value, in multi-dimensional terms, of community gardening in the Region; and

(b) inform policy-makers, planners, community workers, public health professionals, and gardeners about effective ways to expand and improve community gardening in Waterloo Region.

In the *Community Gardening Storytelling Project*, eighty four gardeners participated in unstructured ethnographic interviews through which the meaning of gardening in their lives emerged from the stories they told. Seven of the unstructured interviews were conducted in Mandarin. Each gardener was asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire at the end of the ethnographic interview in order to be able to describe the sample of gardeners who told their stories.

An ethnographic interview approach differs from more traditional questionnaires which ask a set number of questions in order to be able to quantify and generalize about outcomes. The strength of an ethnographic approach is that it provides a more in depth understanding of people’s experiences and behaviours. However, this approach does not allow us to quantify, for example, the number of gardeners who experience a certain health benefit.

A detailed description of the methodology as well as a description of the sample of gardeners interviewed used can be found in Appendix Four.

In keeping with the ethnographic and storytelling approach, the results are presented very much in the words of the gardeners themselves with limited description by the authors.
Analysis: main reasons and themes that emerged

The researchers had anticipated that this study would highlight differences among different demographic groups of gardeners (e.g. immigrant gardeners, physically-challenged gardeners, etc.). It became clear during the analysis phase, however, that the some important and interesting themes ran right through all demographic groups, and that each group itself embodied more diversity than similarity. Therefore the researchers decided to organize the results thematically, based on the main reasons for gardening that emerged from people’s stories.²

The eight main reasons for gardening that emerged from the stories are as follows: 1) addressing physical and mental stress, 2) community building, 3) satisfying curiosity and building skills, 4) enhanced meals & diet, 5) environmental concerns related to food, 6) involvement of children, 7) saving money on food, and 8) preserving tradition and culture.

Figure 5: Main reason for Gardening

² This is an example of how Grounded Theory works: the findings are not based on pre-determined categories, but emerge from the lived experience of the participants as they describe it.
These eight reasons were organized into three main themes: health, inclusion, and learning (see Figure 6). These themes represent the main ways in which community gardens contribute to health and the social environment.

Figure 6: Reasons and Themes
**Gardeners’ Words: How Gardening Contributes to Health, Inclusion, and Learning**

The primary purpose of this research was to document the value, in multi-dimensional terms, of community gardening in Waterloo Region.

The following three sections describe the meaning and value of gardening expressed in the stories. They have been organized into three themes: health, inclusion, and learning. For each of the themes, the reasons for gardening that contributed to that theme are listed and quotes from the gardeners are used to illustrate it.

**Health**

Working in a community garden, as most gardeners told us, means being physically and mentally engaged in the midst of a green open space: one that provides temporary respite from the pressures of home, work, and worries. Plants are nurtured and reward the gardener with edible roots, stems, leaves, flowers or fruits. It means getting some physical exercise, and coming away each time with a handful or basketful of tasty produce which adds to dietary quality and saves money. There is no contest, no unfeasible expectation, but plenty of room for personal creativity. These small but repeated activities and achievements combine to improve mental health and physical health in a way that is natural and inexpensive. Community gardens make a neighbourhood a healthy place to live.

- **Addressing physical and mental stress**
- **Saving money on food**
- **Enhancing meals and diet**
1. ADDRESSING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL STRESS

Fifteen people maintained that good mental health was their primary reason for gardening. An additional 43 gardeners told stories that included insightful anecdotes about their mental health. These included the role of gardening in abating current stress – but also in healing past trauma or anxiety.

“Why I went into this gardening, I suffered some trauma and what this was, was like an escape from what I went through, and it helped with any type of depression that I was going through….so there were three reasons actually, but basically how I got started was because of the abuse, and it sort of helped kind of like therapy.”

“De-stress - oh yeah, absolutely. Sometimes I get a little bit worked up over stupid little things, like we all do. So, just 2 weeks ago actually, I was having a bit of a problem and calling my husband. I was all upset and he said, “just go weed for a little bit, just go...go there”. So pulling out weeds, looking at something, or pinching suckers off the tomato, makes me feel a little bit better. It’s nice and quiet here; you can hear the birds and you see the squirrels and what they are up to. Yeah, de-stressing is a huge/big part of this plot here.”

“I can see and I can feel the energy just kind of calm down. It just settles and everybody just becomes more, I feel, more expressive; like they have more affect; they smile more; their shoulders drop; just a lot of physical changes I can see in everyone when they get out here. And we don’t talk a lot about smelling the fresh air and feeling the breeze, but I think that all of that is so very impactful. And it is nice because it resonates through the day - so a lot of them will feel better through the day. And some of them have an evening walk this evening and when we see them you can tell they have the glow; this after-glow, the gardening after-glow.”

“I find that it is relaxing. It is nice to step away from your daily life to get out and water. It feels like you’re away from the city a little bit so you can be by yourself and weed and water and take some time to relax during the day.”

“It’s a kind of labour (that) for whatever reason brings me such calm. It’s very therapeutic.”

“Just like two years ago, I suffered from deep depression. Actually, I didn’t want to go anywhere; I didn’t want to see anyone and now (that I’m gardening) I think it is changing some.”

“When you plant your garden in the spring and there are all of these gaps and then by now it’s all filled in. It’s amazing! I lost a brother to suicide and if I hadn’t been able to garden and be a part of the gardening world I don’t know how I would’ve pulled myself out of that black hole. It was so tragic and sad. But the garden has some sort of healing property to it. You’re in the garden and you see this growth. Most gardeners...have such hope and see such a positive approach. They say: “okay it didn’t work this year but we can try it again next year and it will be better!” Hope lives within a true gardener. This restores your soul and psyche. There is a marvelous emotional component to it.”

Several community gardeners found that the satisfaction of sharing produce with others was a way to improve mental health.
“I get satisfaction out of seeing something grow from a seed, I like to fertilize them and enjoy seeing them grow. If I can grow a bunch of tomatoes and provide for the other residents - I enjoy that. I enjoy growing stuff for other people and stuff everyone can benefit from.”

“There is a lot that comes from the plot. We always share with the neighbours. We brought some to the food bank – it is nice. You can’t eat everything – there is a lot. We are happy when we share with our friends and give to the food bank.”

“Last year I even ended up sharing most of my stuff with the food bank because you know – you get too much. So you just share it. That gives you a good feeling too.”

Implicit in many gardener stories was also an acknowledgement of the health benefits of being physically active in the garden.

“First of all, we (my husband and I) did some physical exercise...we biked to there (community garden). While it was uphill, we walked with the bike and chatted together. When we got there, we did some physical activities by gardening. The feeling was really good.”

“Being surrounded by the buzz of bees, greenness, the smell of the soil, the herbs, all contribute to your mental wellbeing and give you your physical workout.”

“It’s good exercise since you go at your own pace. I see people working eight hours in the garden. I’m old. I work two hours. If I get tired and sit down, no one says I can’t do that. Even watering you’re weight lifting.”

2. ENHANCING MEALS & DIET

Seventeen interviewees told us that the produce itself was their main motivation for gardening – in large part because of the taste. An additional 38 people said that the health value of food they produced for themselves and their families was the primary benefit. Some enthused about how gardening encouraged their children to enjoy vegetables, and others noted improvements to their own diet, including eating more produce, eating more or different parts of the plants, eating a greater variety, or even eating less meat. “My eight year old daughter is the real vegetable lover, the minute the beans are ready she’s out there eating them. Cherry tomatoes and green beans are her favourites.”

“My kids tend to eat more vegetables out of the garden. They don’t like them from the grocery store. They’ll say "I don’t like carrots", and then "Oh! I’ll eat a carrot out of the garden." I guess that’s just the way it goes.”

“You can eat fresh vegetables and you don’t even have to overcook them. I must admit you can eat these beans right out of the
garden while the ones at the store are a little soft and need to be cooked. It is healthier because you don’t even have to cook them.”

“Our home eats better in the summer. It surprises me that we don’t turn red with the amount of tomatoes we eat. We just devour them. It’s insane. Two people eating a two quart basket of tomatoes in two days. I make relishes and pickles and chutneys. We can our own tomatoes and when you open that jar it smells like summer.”

“I was given beet tops to eat. After I cleaned them all up and boiled it, it was very close to spinach. I think dark green leaves...you can’t get any healthier than that.”

Some gardeners related their dietary changes to the new foods they had learned about from their gardening neighbours. Others were able to enjoy foods from their own culture that they could otherwise not buy here.

“I planted beets. I told her (my neighbour) that I didn’t know how to eat beets and asked her to show me. My neighbour was convincing me to eat beets. So I planted them and last year I was able to taste beets and I like them now because of her.”

“Each one of us plants things related to their background or country. For example some Chinese guys plant some things we didn’t know what they were. So we’ll ask and see how they use it. These fava beans you don’t find in the market. We plant things you don’t find in the market because other things you might buy cheap.”

“We grow (the Chinese) vegetables that we love... and we ate a lot of these vegetables. We preserve...radishes if we could not finish eating. Usually, we cut the green radishes into slices and then dried them. In the winter, we made salty sun-dried radishes.”

“We have the crops now that you don’t have in Canada. They don’t plant them. In our country we eat the seed and the leaves. The whole crop. We miss eating it! Now every day we eat!”

“We plant and cook Molokhia. It is like spinach and very traditional. But here in Canada you don’t have it and people don’t know about it.”

Some gardeners grew foods in order to meet their health-related dietary requirements.

“I eat more vegetables. For example you cannot go everyday to the shop for parsley. My blood hemoglobin is low and parsley helps. I’ve eaten a lot of parsley and now the doctor tells me my blood is good. When I have this garden I can eat it every day, but I couldn’t go shopping just for one thing every day. When you have a garden you can come and eat every day.”

“My wife last year felt like she had diabetes. Now she has to eat more vegetables like squash. It can get expensive. So now I planted more for here so she can eat them. We support her.”

“I’m supposed to be eating a healthy diet because of my conditions. I get a little bit here and there. Fresh beans, zucchinis, tomatoes, and you should see my onions! I’ve enjoyed it because I’ve been eating it every day I’ve had it. It puts a smile on my face and makes my body feel happy. You can’t get better than that.”

Importantly, some gardeners spoke about how other people eat better because of their gardening.
“I eat better and other people eat better. Because what I have more of, I share. I take it into the Working Centre. When tomatoes are in season, I always have much more than I need, so I go around the community and let them know if they want some I will share what I have, and the rest is for the Working Centre for use in the café.”

“The kitchen (of the institution I live in) gets the tomatoes (that I grow). I think last year we grew a couple of bushels of tomatoes even.”

3. SAVING MONEY ON FOOD

For three gardeners, saving money on food was their main reason for gardening. During the course of their storytelling, 27 others talked about how having a garden plot contributed in some way to their food budget, in some cases significantly.

“And then – I think it is cheaper for us because we are six people. If you plant what you want – it is cheaper than buying it (food in the store).”

“Yes it helps us save a lot [of money]. During the summer I do not buy any vegetables. Yes, only in the winter time I buy vegetables.”

“Especially with the price of food in grocery stores, even a little bit of stuff (from the garden) can help get through the summer.”

“From an economical point of view it is quite profitable. For my lot I only pay six dollars, the water is free from the canal, and I just pay the price of the plants. My experience over the last three years has been that the amount of vegetables that I grew, I didn’t need to shop for them for three months.”

“I had a really good valid reason for doing this. I was in a bit of a crisis financially. It wasn’t a lot but it was a help. And also the benefits of nutrition.”

“It will supplement it [our food budget]. I’m sure it will help. We have 3 cherry tomato plants – and once they start ripening – we won’t have to buy them for ...whatever dollars at the grocery store. And we paid 1.29 for all four plants. And it just takes watering it. So that is interesting. It does supplement – not by much – it is not a huge plot or anything but it helps.”

Some people deliberately garden to save money on more expensive items – like organics or traditional foods.

“Moreover, it (the community garden) is important sources of our organic foods. Organic food are very expensive in the supermarket, we rarely buy them.”
“Oh, yes. It is more expensive to buy organics. So I can eat more organic here in summer because I only have to buy organic in winter. So that dollars spend out more if I could not grow my own. I might not be able to afford to buy organics all the time.”

Some spoke from the perspective of others.

“...for some people it’s a good little sustainer. I know for one person it’s very important. She grows her fresh stuff for the year and cans some of this stuff. On a very limited income it can be a good supplement without having to always tap on the door of the food bank and maintain some independence.”

“These people here I know are struggling to make ends meet. I would bring watermelons because it’s a kid magnet. One time the little girl told me, ‘I can’t keep buying watermelons because it’s too expensive’. They’re only $2.99. I know this family needs this garden.”

While some did not refer to financial savings, they spoke about the amount of food they grew and how they didn’t need to go to the grocery store or farmers’ market as often.

“For those people who are not working –they don’t have to buy. I don’t have to buy onions. After I harvest my onions I don’t buy onions for three months. I cook a lot and I use my onions.”

“In here (Canada), our garden provides sufficient food for our family and we don’t need to buy vegetables in the supermarket in summer.”
Gardener Profile: James

By the time he was 5-years-old James Graham was hooked on gardening.

It all started when "somebody gave me a package of seeds in a store; so I went home and planted the pumpkin seeds she gave me. My parents were dreadful gardeners but somehow, intuitively, I knew how to garden. My garden – at five years old – had no weeds ... I had a tremendous crop of pumpkins and I was hooked."

James quickly became the gardener of the family; by the age of 12 he readily admits, “I was the gardening geek of all gardening geeks,” and did most of the gardening in the family.

“One of the projects I had every year was to grow 100 cabbages. I would grow all of my plants from seed,” says James in an interview with the Community Garden Storytelling Project in August 2012.

His garden helped feed his parents and four siblings, “My family needed the food and we raised enough to keep us from August to November.”

As it is today, storing the bounty of the garden was a challenge back then. James and his family used time-honoured techniques to extend the life of the harvest.

“We would go and harvest the cabbages, dig a pit and bury them for the winter, in maple leaves and then cover them in dirt. We had cabbages for the winter. We buried potatoes too. The garden had a financial motivation and I loved the success of it.”

Since these early successes James’ connection to the soil has grown, giving a deeper meaning to his life. He now tends a plot at the Good Earth Community Garden behind St John’s Lutheran Church on Willow St. in Waterloo. He is Life Member of the Waterloo Horticultural Society and is active in the Ontario Horticultural Society. The garden is the place where he works through life’s ups and downs.

“I have two great-nephews that I encourage to garden. One little boy likes yellow and the other likes purple. This year I mailed them purple and yellow beans and they’re very interested in what will happen. I think when they have success, they’ll be hooked.”

“My youngest nephew took a real interested in it. He’s playing sports right now, but who is to say that in twenty years he won’t be back in the garden.”

James’ life took a difficult turn in 2008 when he lost his brother to suicide.

“If I hadn’t been able to garden and be a part of the gardening world I don’t know how I would’ve pulled myself out of that black hole. It was so tragic and sad.”

James says he has “succumbed” to the optimistic outlook shared by all gardeners.

“It didn’t work this year but we can try it again next year and it will be better! Hope lives within a true gardener. This restores your soul.”
Community gardens lend themselves towards the inclusion of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, ages, income levels, and needs. They are natural meeting places where networking and exchange of ideas take place. The vegetables themselves can illustrate cultural diversity, as people plant okra, bok choy, bitter melon, callaloo, kale, chicory, yams, cilantro, watercress, fava beans, tomatillos, jalapeño chillies, and various types of radishes, eggplants, celery and herbs. With help, residents who are physically and/or mentally challenged can and do grow vegetables, showing patience, concentration and a sense of pride at their individual plots or raised beds. In many places, children’s garden plots are a sign that growing food is part of growing up. Community gardens represent spaces of inclusion in a healthy neighbourhood.
4. COMMUNITY BUILDING

Seventeen gardeners emphasized in their stories that they valued “community building” most about their gardening experience.

Stories from gardeners show that building community happens at a number of different levels. At the individual level, people connect over a common activity and build a personal social network. At a group level, people organize themselves and work together to create and maintain a garden. Community building can also happen at a societal level when attitudes and prejudices are challenged and communities experience greater cohesion.

Individual Level

“You’ll find that people are at their gardens more instead of just planting it and leaving it. If you’ve got contact with other people that are gardening...you get to know them as well. I really think that’s the main thing, that personal contact between each person.”

“You can also meet new people. It’s a type of entertainment actually. Sometimes it makes life better. It’s one of those special things to do. I can show a friend from China the vegetables I have planted here when they visit. I think it creates enjoyment.

“We shared our seeds with other people, which is fun and keeps us busy. Most importantly, from gardening we felt Canadian spirit and its harmony, optimist and positive social atmosphere.”

“I just think it is nice because you get to meet other people and talk to them about their garden and ask them how they are doing. If someone has a question you can just go to them and you can ask “how did you do that?” or “How come your plant is growing that much better than mine and we are right next door?” That is what I like about the community -- you get to meet people in the neighbourhood and they get to meet the grandkids and they look out for them – even when they see them out on the street – because they know them.”

“It is my way of networking and trying to integrate into the community because I am new here. And I have met some friends here. I meet them – even though we do not understand each other all of the time. I am trying to understand some key words.”

“Me, my family, and my neighbors feel sense of community because we are all out there and learn from each other. Like Cathy and all her heirloom tomatoes. She gave me some that started from the seeds. Then, I saved my seeds and passed on. So we are always sharing and it is just a nice camaraderie. Even if we are not talking, you could see somebody else down there. It is a nice feeling.”
“In addition, I made lots of friends in the garden, such as people from Syria and Russia...”

“As I said some of them don’t even speak the same language, but there is some communication there, even if it’s not verbal. And you meet people you wouldn’t ordinarily meet. And of course we all have something in common; we all love to grow things. I don’t think it’s really for the produce per se; it’s just the joy of creating it yourself.”

“We came to Canada seven years ago and here last year (at the garden) my family can meet other people. We can speak Chinese and English so we meet a few new people... and we feel that the city is welcome. It’s not only for vegetables but so we can be part of the community. When I first came last year I did not know anybody. But now this year I know lots of people. I think my social system might be a little bit better than before. It is better. “

“Since we’re retired you don’t have much to do. So I’ll take my little hoe and come down to the garden. A couple hours later, I’ve got some good exercise, I’m back in tune with the plots, I’ve talked to some people, I’ve gotten some fresh air, I love it. I don’t know what I’d do without the gardens.”

“I also think people are also allowed to get know each other because a lot of immigrants and refugees don’t know a lot of people or don’t know a lot of Canadians. There’s a stat somewhere that says it takes an immigrant twelve years to get to know a Canadian family. Community gardens just erase those barriers and you get to know your neighbor.”

Group Level

“Community [is what I value], and its really neat since we try to get our kids involved, its very much become a family affair. We have cleanups in the spring and fall to get the gardens ready and then we have a potluck. We have landscape meetings, scheduled meetings, but there is still a relaxed atmosphere. But really it’s about having people around and enjoying what you do with somebody.”

“I watch the whole community come together too. Everybody watches everybody else’s kids and they employ each other. She picks up one of the moms from over here and they go to work together. It’s just a community effort. They’re struggling to make ends meet but they are making ends meet with the help of the garden.”

“Communities are based on relationships, so anything that fosters good relationships is a good idea I think......it can be something that impacts relationships, transcending more than just garden space. How you garden, and who you include, and making it open to all who want to participate, changes communities for the better.”
“It’s beyond growing vegetables; it’s well beyond that; and I think it was really nice to have the food bank involved from the beginning because they provided that vantage point, that perspective. They really did make it more meaningful and maybe it was because I was a graduate student and was a little bit more open to ideas and things. Truth be told, we have had a great blend from the beginning in terms of cross-generational participants; socio-economically, we have a blend of people; ethnically, we have blended people; it’s a pretty amazing sort of hodgepodge. It seems to work because of our one central love; which is the garden itself. And it’s a great sharing environment.”

Societal Level

“I’ve been meeting all sorts of great people. I’ve met a lot of people that you might otherwise judge based on their appearance and think one thing but once you have the chance to get to know them you meet the most amazing people.”

“One of the stories is about the man who - while he came out and planted with me - kept making negative comments about the refugees. I got to know the refugees and as they shared their stories with me I shared them with him. There were three of them here who literally had to run out of Burma alone. Their parents said run and they ran – fourteen and thirteen years old. They ran from Burma to India where they had to stay at a refugee camp for eight years before they gained asylum in Canada. They now have a business and they work really hard. I told him that story and he sees them more as humans now, as fellow people. Before it was like he thought of them as negative objects that were taking up space in Canada. On the flip side they all thought of him as a crabby old man. “

5. INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN

Four interviewees found that their main motivation for gardening was involving children. Another 31 interviewees referred to the importance of including children in gardening. Some people focused on the importance of teaching the skills of growing, cooking, and preserving food, with the concern that children should eventually be able to “fend for themselves and not depend entirely on the grocery store”. Others enjoyed the extra recreational time that they spent gardening together with their children. Several parents felt it was important that their children understand where food comes from, and what different fruits and vegetables were. Examples were given of children who would eat the produce if they had seen it growing or been involved in growing it.
“Even my son didn’t like vegetables before and when I grew them he saw here that I was doing the growing of the vegetables and then he became interested in eating the vegetables. When I buy stuff from the store he loses interest in them.”

“...and kids are way more into eating stuff. I remember my daughter would see peas and pick them right off and eat them. When you are introduced to food in its natural state you appreciate it and are much more open to eating different things. That was when she was little but I think that applies to all children. Kids love to run through and eat the raspberries off the bushes and they’ll eat more fresh things when they’re there, especially when they grow it.”

Other reasons for involving children were more aesthetic and experiential, such as getting used to the feeling of soil, worms and plants. Some spoke of the joy they experienced in watching children harvest and eat vegetables, which mirrored their own childhood experience.

“And I know it’s not comparable to people with farms and lands but to actually get your hands in the dirt, plant seeds, and grow and so because it was my experience and I am able to decipher how I may have turned out if gardening had not been a part of my life. I think it is right up there with feeding your children.”

“The best for me is when she sees something that is ready and she [my daughter] asks me if she can pick it and I say – of course you can pick it. It is a nice feeling. It reminds me of my childhood and I’m so happy that she likes to [garden].”

Importantly, a number of people emphasized that children should be able to grow food at school.

“I really think the schools need to get involved. We have a school very close to where we live, and that would be a great place to garden. Even if we weren’t involved, just to have the kids learning would be so practical and important. It really gives them skills they’ll need.”

“I think it might be neat to involve school children. I don’t think its part of a curriculum to have kids go out and tend a garden but one way of teaching them to be nutritious is to teach them how to garden. And if you can have a garden that’s willing to have the kids come and help, especially during harvest and planting it could be really educational and a community building activity.”

“I always go back to being a kid and growing stuff in school, and how good it would be to get kids back into junior horticultural programs or group garden projects.”
Eight gardeners said they wanted to preserve some aspect of their culture as their main reason for gardening. Additionally, 34 others mentioned that tending a garden plot contributed in some way to preserving culture, such as maintaining the traditional foods, skills, and language that linked them with their birth country or that of their parents.

The deeply cultural and sometimes spiritual nature of gardening emerged when gardeners spoke about preserving aboriginal traditions – such as performing planting rituals and growing healing plants. We heard from immigrants, recent and not, about how their gardens helped them to maintain a connection to the land that they had established in their youth. For example, gardening enabled some people to maintain the parts of their culture that valued spending time outdoors with others in the neighbourhood. Gardening was felt to be an important opportunity to teach culture and language to children and grandchildren.

“In the Middle East people don’t stay at home for a long time. They want to be outside in nature and they have gardens.”

“The immigrant population has latched onto it I think. Enjoying nature and spending time together is something we don’t do as much in our (Canadian) culture.”

“I don’t want to stay home for a long time. If I have the time, I want to go into nature. I really like nature and I want to plant something that reminds me of my country when I was a child planting something like that.”

“We also teach him [grandson] Chinese poetry while gardening.”

“Gardening has made me more aware of my heritage and my history. My grandfather was a farmer and my grandmother had a massive garden and it was how my mom grew up gardening and it’s something that is passed on. As prairie farmers, the more time you spend with the earth, the more you understand how they see things. It shapes their knowledge of their spirituality and their identity as farmers and as people of the land. In the prairies you’re always aware of the land because you always see it, there’s nothing in the way to lose track of where you are. That’s something that stuck in my head, the history.”

Many gardeners talked of maintaining specific cultural traditions related to foods, gardening skills, and food preparation. They also passed on that knowledge to fellow gardeners.
(A) CULTURAL FOODS

“...you asked me about what I grow. I grow bok choy because I have an Asian background and the garden is not limited to stuff like tomatoes and potatoes. And other cultures grow all sort of strange things, and had traditional and cultural foods”

“I grow lots of beans, eggplants, tomato, garlic, arum, peanuts, green pepper and red pepper, and hot chilli. We love hot chilli! Arum is Bangladesh language, like potato and like okra.”

“Each one of us plants things related to their background or country. For example some Chinese guys plant some things - we didn’t know what they were. So we’ll ask and see how they use it. These fava beans you don’t find in the market. We plant things you don’t find in the market because other things you might buy cheap.”

“We started weeding and then one of our friends from a neighbouring plot came over and asked if we were going to eat them. And we told him they were weeds, but he asked if he could help because he eats them, so we told him he could “harvest” all he wanted! And so we had baskets of them and he and another person came over. All these nationalities congregated and explained how you could eat a number of these weeds by stir frying them or putting them in salads. I was just down there yesterday and I pulled out another big handful of them and threw them in our supper tonight, they’re actually very good.”

(B) GARDENING SKILLS

“I use the things I learned working with my grandfather in his garden and I still use them today. Like how to tie fruit and when to fertilize. We grow organically here so it’s all manure and compost.”

“I used the techniques from Northern of China to water my plants as the weather was dry there, but most of them (other Chinese gardeners) used techniques from Southern of China to water their plants which were insufficient, because they used a small amount of water and it evaporated quickly in the hot weather, they had to water every day. However, I used a big bucket to water my plants so I was able to water them once a week. My watering technique was also complimented by gardeners from other countries.”
(C) FOOD PREPARATION

“If we have a lot of green beans, we cook them and then store in the fridge. Or, we use mustards to make salty vegetables. Sometimes, we made dried bok choy. You could store them for one year as the weather is dry here (Canada). Unlike the place (China) that I live before, the vegetables will turn yellow after you store.”

“It turns out they use the young leaves in the Middle East for salads and they cook the older leaves and grind the seeds into a flour. These two people here are growing things we think are weeds and that farmers think are a nuisance. It’s surprising!”
Gardener Profile: Ghada

Four years ago, growing vegetables was nothing but a memory from home for Ghada.

Her father was a farmer in Syria, “We grew everything, the same: onions, parsley, mint, potatoes, green beans, Swiss chard, spinach – everything! We had orange trees too.”

But it wasn’t until Ghada was invited to visit her friend’s garden at the Victoria Hills community garden that she discovered she could have one of her own.

“I love to plant vegetables.”

“I said ‘okay I need one!’ I got a half plot that no one took. It was late in June, but I put my feet on it for next year. I was still able to grow radishes and squash.”

For Ghada it’s not the monetary value of the produce that’s important, “If you are angry, you can come here in the fresh air and dig and water. You go home a different person. Believe me.”

Along with the restorative power of working the earth comes the benefit of healthy organically-grown vegetables. Ghada grows plants traditional to her culture such as fava beans and molokhia, a spinach-like vegetable, but she grows common vegetables too.

“I plant onions. They have a much different taste than ones from the grocery store. When I chop the onions all of our eyes are tearing! When I buy from the grocery store – nothing. I wonder how they plant these onions. No taste, no smell, no nothing – like plastic.”

Gardening in Canada is pretty much like gardening in Syria says Ghada; so it was simply a matter of applying her knowledge. She also likes to share what she knows with friends.

“‘My friend (Nawal) did not know how to plant, but wanted a garden. So I told her ‘I will show you how to plant, how to water, how to do it all.’ Last year she planted by herself and it did not do very well. But this year, it is very good.”

Tending her community garden plot has not been without its frustrations.

“Two years ago I planted fava beans. In Canada we can’t always get them and I missed them a lot. So I planted here and they grew very good! .. Last year I worked very hard and some people came and took them. After that I got very angry and decided this year, I’m not growing them anymore.”

Despite this disappointment the rewards of her garden remain precious to her, particularly the friendships she has made, “There are three other people I talk to a lot. When I didn’t come one day, the next time I saw them they greeted me: ‘Hi Ghada! How are you? We miss you!”

“I got mine (garden) four years ago and I will never leave it.”
Learning

Community gardens are focal points for creating and sharing knowledge about food, starting with how to grow certain fruits and vegetables. Initial learning quickly spawns a desire to learn more about other plants, how to preserve them, how to save seeds, how to create compost, and more. While the range of actual gardening knowledge varies from beginners to master gardeners, a more critical aspect seems to be the active “culture of learning” that is generated by community gardens.

Knowledge leads to greater understanding but also to more questions; consequently it tended to raise both respect for farmers and concern about the environment and issues in the food system. Gardeners also spoke passionately about the greater sense of control and confidence that gardening had brought them. They expressed excitement and pride about the rewards of their labour and learning: that of fresh, personally-grown produce and tasty preserves. Many of them consequently wanted to share that knowledge with children and hoped for expanded opportunities for others to learn as well. Desjardins (2010) makes the link between increased engagement in the food system and greater likelihood of eating more nutritious foods.

Satisfying curiosity and building skills

Environmental concerns related to food

Learning
7. SATISFYING CURIOSITY & BUILDING SKILLS

Twelve gardeners pointed to their curiosity to learn new skills and knowledge as the main reason they gardened. All but three of the other gardeners interviewed mentioned learning and building skills during the course of their stories.

Gardeners spoke about learning about how vegetables grow, new types of vegetables, controlling pests, planting times and techniques, preparing soil, composting/fertilizing, pruning, hardening off seedlings, making structures to support plants, wild edible plants, and more. Abundant produce from the gardens generated learning and experimenting in the kitchen, increasing cooking and preserving skills. The following quotes illustrate some of the spirit of curiosity that permeates community gardening.

“We picked two zucchini this past weekend and we are going to grill them on the BBQ - or we’ll cook them somehow – but that is going to be interesting. It was just neat getting a zucchini from a plant. We started in the end of May - and it was just a tiny plant and then it just exploded. Within a month’s time it was huge and producing zucchini. They weren’t that big then – but now we got two nice sized ones last weekend. It was good.”

“If the carrots come up – I have some parisienne carrots (round like potatoes) and some purple carrots – if they produce. And I’ve got purple beans. Different stuff. We have two types of radishes – one regular kind and the other is a watermelon radish. It is white on the outside and when you cut it open it has red starburst. Those different ones we planted from seed. Some things we planted from seeds and some things we planted from plants – just to see the different – how they grow.”

“Yeah – it is a learning thing - and experimenting with different types of things - like I have been looking for years for the purple carrots. And I didn’t even know until this year that there are purple beans. So that is an experiment.”

“That is one of the cool things about this too is you think that you are not doing something right and you get to talking to people and you realize that you are not so bad after all. So that is kind of cool too. Or else you find out that you are really doing something wrong and you could have been doing it better – if you had done something differently. So it is trial and error - and you might lose the veggie or it might work.”

“I’m getting more adventurous. I’m trying broccoli for the first time this year. A couple years back I tried plants that could be used for dyeing. I’m trying different things. When I first started I stuck to...
things like tomatoes and onions. Things that were easy and I knew I could grow. They (fellow gardeners) come and ask me what kind of strange plants I’m growing. I had some woad, which gets these beautiful tall yellow flowers every two years. A neighbour asked what it was and I was able to tell her how you can dye with it. It’s a weed basically, but it can make a blue dye.”

“I’ve learned the value of mulching. Putting on top mulch is fantastic. I had never seen that done before and a couple of my neighbours did that, so I decided to try and see. Fantastic. It’s the best.”

“Yeah – a lot of things just kind of motivated me. I wanted to see how much I can actually grow for myself and I wanted to learn how to harvest the seeds – I save seeds now – and I wanted to learn how to store the stuff in the winter. And I wanted to basically be self-sustainable – for myself.”

“I’m interested in how the plants grow and what they do and what goes with what. I’m experimenting with a row of seeds I’ve planted recently called the “peanut experiment” because I just learned that peanuts can grow in Ontario. I’ve planted four and the squirrels have eaten three of them, but I just want to see what they do! I only know that because I looked it up and would love to see it happen. I’ve also built a lean-to greenhouse behind my house so I can grow through the winter.”

“I’ve tried different systems such as black cover cloths to soak in the water, had good success but labour intensive to weed with it. Last year I had a couple of bales of hay dug beneath the topsoil to let the worms in. We’ve got a lot of rabbits so we also spread dog hair around to keep them away too.”

“I love to experiment; I try things like okra just to see how it grew. The flowers of okra are beautiful. I bought these little hairs of leeks. I brought them at Thanksgiving to my family and they didn’t even seem to know what they were, but now it’s a tradition and I divide them up among them and they look forward to it.”

“These ladies just blow me away. They tell me when I’m approaching something the wrong way. They’re very polite about it. In any given year I learn fifty or sixty things. I even had a lady telling me how to weed correctly! It’s a lot of fun.”

“We get ideas from other people. If I have this crop and somebody doesn’t know about it, I can tell them about it, and they can tell me about the crops they grow. It means a lot to learn through each other. We can learn more from different kinds of people. Being the same people you can’t learn much. We are really lucky in Canada. There is every kind of people. We have different types.”

“I learn to eat things I didn’t know how to eat and they’ll come up and say “you know you can eat that part of the garlic”.

“I would like to know how to preserve the squashes and just make them last through the fall, this is something I wasn’t able to do; I should do research on that.”

“Swiss chard – I planted it my first year – I didn’t know what it was but I just planted it there. I gave most of it to the coordinator. When I planted it again this year – she asked me why – and I said I am trying to convince myself to eat it. I planted it because maybe one day I will try to cook it.”
8. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS RELATED TO FOOD

Seven gardeners said that environmental concerns related to food were their main reason for gardening. Another 41 people mentioned it as part of their reason for gardening.

Some spoke of how the process of gardening has brought about increased awareness of where food comes from, organic foods, and weather patterns.

“Oh, and another thing this garden has taught me - I should have mentioned that before. I am much more aware of organic produce now. I never bought organic before I had a garden. And now the taste of the vegetables is much better - there is no question. But now I have been doing farmer research into organic vegetables and there are certain vegetables that I would never buy anything except organic.”

“I wonder if I wasn’t gardening I may not have the deep appreciation for nature. It brings us in contact with nature. You hear on the weather report that it will be another lovely day, but we here in the garden recognize that we’re in the midst of a very serious drought that will probably cost us a lot of money. It’s taken them weeks to clue in, but we knew by the second week that we were in trouble.”

Others indicated that they garden because of concerns about peak oil/climate change and where food will come from in the future if people don’t know how to grow it themselves. They felt lack of knowledge related to food posed a risk. Some expressed opposition to transporting food over long distances.

“For now trucking things around is still viable, but there may come a point where his [a professional market gardener in Maine who can grow vegetables ten months out of the year with no energy inputs] systems are financially viable....but gas is relatively cheap again so his time has yet to come.”

“It is just the fact that everyone needs everything to be so convenient. And it is not right. I don’t think it is right. It is not right to have my cucumbers shipped from Mexico. I think that I can grow stuff here. I think it is just a more sustainable way of doing things...back to the old style where people grew their own food and didn’t rely on shipping and trucking.”

“There are people you meet now who have no idea how to grow something and that is kind of scary. That is something you should know.”

Gardeners also expressed concerns about pesticides and genetic manipulation – and felt safer when they ate food that they had grown themselves.

“You will feel safe if you eat something that you grow. Also, you got fresh and higher quality food.”
“It’s that whole notion of not loving what you do, but learning to love what you do. It’s seeing value in those things that are everyday. That’s the broader philosophical view, but actually growing food unaffected by manipulation genetically or through pesticide use is important as well.”

“Moreover, it (the community garden) is an important source of our organic foods. Organic food are very expensive in the supermarket, we rarely buy them.”

“I do think we should have more vegetable gardens. We have to start being more self reliant. I don’t think people understand. We go to the grocery store thinking there is an endless supply of food, but the way food is right now it’s a little bit dangerous. All of these monocultures and genetically modified organisms, people don’t understand the risks of what we’re doing.”

“But I grow vegetables because I love vegetables – I grow things that I don’t get at the grocery store. Things without chemicals actually.”

“I can see we’re going much more monoculture and that there is much less diversity and I can just see that one of these times in the future something is going to hit that Monsanto won’t be able to fix and they’ll have to come back to some basic genetic cores of plants. I’d like to be part of sustaining that.”

Lastly, gardeners spoke about the environmental value of locally grown food. They spoke of noticing the difference between fresh produce and produce trucked in from elsewhere and well as the difference between organically-grown produce and conventionally-grown produce.

“The garlic I grew is so freaking good! It’s awesome and way better than the stuff you get in the stores that’s from overseas and it’s spent three months in storage. I had no idea garlic was so sticky until I started growing it myself.”

“I plant onions. They have a much different taste than ones from (the grocery store). When I chop these green onions all of our eyes are tearing! When I buy from grocery store - nothing. No taste, no smell, no nothing, like plastic. That’s why I like these.”
Gardener Profile: Joanne

Joanne fell in love last summer. It was a beautiful kohlrabi that won her vegetarian heart.

It was a whirlwind thing, “I don’t know much about kohlrabi – we just met this year.”

They met at the Giving Garden on Elgin St. South, Cambridge last spring when someone donated some seedlings to the community garden. Joanne has a plot there and spotted kohlrabi among the donations and immediately popped four plants into a vacant corner of her garden.

In an interview last August, Joanne talked about her relationship with kohlrabi. “I’m growing kohlrabi right now and I’m in love with it – because it grows so easy and fast.”

“I had heard that they taste like turnips and I love turnips. And they were cool looking.”

It’s really no surprise that Joanne found kohlrabi. She’s an avid gardener and spends many summer evenings near her plants.

“It is quiet here. I come out a lot by myself – come here at night just to be by myself. I sit under the tree and drink my coffee … you know, sit by my garden and watch it grow. It’s peaceful.”

Joanne also enjoys experimenting with new plants and growing techniques. She was inspired by the book “The 100 Mile Diet” by Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon.

“It made me really start thinking about what I was eating and where it was coming from and I don’t know – it evolved to this thing where I’m experimenting and growing different plants and seeing what grows well up here in Canada. And I’m always doing research and taking notes and stuff like that.”

Joanne’s passion doesn’t fade with the growing season. She grows plants in her apartment in the winter months and has learned how to pollinate them. She also starts her summer tomato and pepper plants under grow lights in a closet.

One of Joanne’s goals is to be able to grow enough to feed herself year round, “It is going to be part of my retirement plan I think – you know sustainability.”

She is learning how to save seeds and store the produce from her garden. She knows her garden plot is not big enough to support her, “but it is more of an experiment – to see what I can grow. ’Cause I suck at it pretty badly. Well, at least I did at first, but I am getting better. I learn something every year.”

“It just amazes me. The whole thing. I don’t mind getting my hands dirty ’cause you get stuff out of it.”

“It is like making music – you have actually produced something with your own hand.”
Gardeners’ Words: What makes Community Gardens Work

The secondary purpose of this research was to learn about effective ways to expand and improve community gardening in Waterloo Region.

Gardeners were prompted to talk about the things that they thought made community gardens work well and how they overcame challenges. Their responses revealed three main themes: support for garden infrastructure, leadership, and cooperation.

**Support for garden infrastructure** was the most immediate need mentioned by gardeners. Gardeners spoke of the support provided by municipalities, businesses, and churches in the form of resources like land, fences, water, sheds, tools, good soil, raised beds, paths and compost. Many of the interviews happened during a dry time in the summer so there were many comments about the need for a common water source. Some gardens had watering systems based on collecting rain water, some used water from a church or community centre, and others had their own access to the municipal water supply. Ensuring water availability was often the result of resourcefulness, creativity and cooperation among gardeners.

Land that could be used as a community garden for the long term was a critical element. While many gardens enjoyed land tenure that was secure, others did not, such as a garden situated in the same place as a proposed development site. Gardeners also mentioned the importance of land available for gardening being located close to residential areas, to facilitate regular access to the gardens.

**Leadership** at the garden level helped them to thrive. Beyond assigning plots and collecting fees, garden coordinators helped to keep people organized and motivated, provided educational information, facilitated group problem solving, and helped to resolve conflicts. In gardens where community building was important to the gardeners, coordinators would organize social events around spring planting or fall harvest.

"We were very active as coordinators. My wife really knows her stuff and I like creating things so we would complement each other. And then we would talk to the other gardeners and we would have meetings twice a year in the spring and fall. We'd communicate with them what we would like to do
and [hear] if they had any ideas. It became a club. The new coordinator has carried on that tradition. It just turned into a plus. He is so efficient and so easy to work with. When you leave him, you want to do more to help him. He has that personality that attracts support.”

Gardeners cited good communication – provided by good leadership – as important for making a garden run well. Communication among gardeners was important for outlining expectations, building community, educating, and organizing to get general garden tasks done. Communication with the land owner as well as other agencies that provide support was also important. Email was a common way to communicate, but face to face chatting in the garden was also considered necessary.

**Cooperation** among gardeners was essential to make a community garden continue to thrive. When there is a team approach and people pitch in as they can, sharing jobs like pathway maintenance, water tank filling, and compost turning. Gardeners mentioned the need for everyone to have a mindset of respect for others and not just focusing on your own plot. In the hot, dry summer when there were issues with water, gardeners were mindful not to take more than their share.

“Everybody shares the water. You can’t soak your garden and forget about everybody else’s. You have to be conscious that we have not had rain – the barrels are filled by the rain – and so if you see there is not much in them you also need to remember that there are 17 or 18 other people who still have to water theirs too. You need to be a team player.”

**Overcoming challenges**

While these were the elements that made community gardens works well – it was clear through the stories that these conditions are not present in all gardens. Gardens need to be found in high density residential areas where people do not have access to their own land, and where they can easily walk to their garden. One gardener expressed it well:

“I was driving and there was a gas station down by the paramedic station right by Waterloo park and I saw community gardens right up there and my husband and I has a conversation like “how great would it be if every park or every community centre {had a community garden} especially in places where apartments buildings are arising around the city, you know? How great would it be if they had some place to go to and have something to grow!”

Support for infrastructure needs to be continued. Some gardeners spoke about problems with dogs making a mess and rabbits eating their greens and thought that a fence would be helpful. At a minimum, gardens need access to water and land that can be used for gardening in the long term.
In terms of leadership and cooperation, one of the key aspects of community gardening is not only the personal friendships that develop but also the on-going social cooperation and organization that must take place for gardens to be sustainable from year to year. Inevitably there were issues among gardeners; some did not welcome children, some did not keep up with weeding, and others were not pulling their weight with respect to communal duties like pathway maintenance. Some gardens had rules developed by a group of gardeners that were felt to be too stringent by some gardeners. Garden coordinators can make a huge difference in sorting out differences, ensuring mutual respect, and building a sense of teamwork. In gardens where successful collaboration existed, the value of working with others and overcoming challenges were recognized as benefits of gardening in a communal way. These findings further underscore the need for leadership at the garden level. These skills are not only useful in the garden but are transferable to everyday work and living.

**Community Gardens as Part of a Healthy Community**

Community gardens are a simple and inexpensive vehicle to help the Region of Waterloo and Public Health to achieve many of their goals. This section makes the link between the health, inclusion, and learning benefits of community gardening shown in this study with several other Regional and Public Health initiatives.

The Region of Waterloo’s Strategic Plan encourages Public Health – as part of its focus on Healthy and Inclusive Communities - to support the Waterloo Region Healthy Communities Partnership. This Partnership supports policy initiatives that promote healthy eating, physical activity, and mental health. Funding has been received through the Partnership to analyse the land use policies at a local level that support community gardens. Further policy support for community gardens can enable and increase the mental and physical health benefits of participating in community gardens for more citizens.

The Region’s Diversity and Inclusion strategy aims to “create inclusive programs and services that meet the needs of our growing and changing community”. Community gardens allow people to meet and learn about others in ways that are non-threatening and fun. They are environments where people’s skills are valued and shared – in spite of differences.
The Region’s Comprehensive Approach to Poverty Reduction has identified “food systems and access to healthy food” as the topic for a potential innovation hub. While community gardens are not new, they are still innovative in the way they allow many elements of poverty – social isolation, stress, and inadequate income – to be addressed.

In 2009 the Regional Official Plan was adopted by Regional Council and now includes food system policies for the first time. The Plan recognizes the important role community gardens play in creating healthy neighbourhoods. It directs municipalities to establish policies in their official plans that encourage community gardens – which they have now done (see Appendix Five). In addition to this, the Cities of Kitchener and Cambridge both have community garden polices in place outlining the roles of the cities in promoting community gardens and the type of support they are willing to provide. The City of Waterloo has a “Partners in Parks” Program where community gardens are listed as an eligible activity for use of city green space.

Public Health has a 14 year history of seeing the food system as a determinant of health and working at the system level to promote changes which make it easier for people to have healthy food. It has recently co-authored a snapshot of the food system in Waterloo Region categorized by the six food system priorities identified by the Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable. One of these priorities is to encourage and support the expansion of food grown or raised in urban areas. Support for community gardens would enable this priority to be met.

The Ontario Public Health Standards require Public Health to create partnerships to promote health. As well, Public Health’s vision is to build healthy communities through partnership. Current partnerships with the Community Garden Council, the Diggable Communities Collaborative, and the area municipalities and townships are resulting in flourishing community gardens which build and support healthy communities.

Conclusions

This study has presented the benefits that community gardeners reap beyond food production. Gardeners reap benefits in terms of health (enhanced diet, saving money on food, addressing physical and mental stress), inclusion (community building, involvement of children, preserving tradition and culture), and learning (skill building, learning about the environment related to food). It also revealed the key elements of a successful garden, as found by gardeners. But the benefits are not only for the gardeners; this study has provided convincing and clear evidence that encouraging community gardening can help build inclusive and healthy communities.
Gardeners also spoke about strategies that would foster the expansion and continued success of community gardens – such as an inventory of potential sites that could be used for community gardens, land set aside for community gardens in multi-unit dwelling developments, more start up funds for community gardens, and more staff support.

This is an exciting time for community gardens in Waterloo Region. Since 2009, new land use policies in Waterloo Region permit the widespread development of community gardens. The demand for and interest in community garden plots is high – evidenced by many gardens with waiting lists. There are many areas of Waterloo Region that do not have access to community gardens (See Appendix Three). The time is ripe to foster a “culture of community gardens” in Waterloo Region that can go beyond policies that permit space to policies and practices that enable and support the growth of community gardens. This will allow more residents of Waterloo Region to experience the benefits of health, inclusion, and learning.
References


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Appendix 1: Additional Gardener Profiles

Gardener Profile: Gilbert

Gilbert Langerak’s most important gardening tools are books – two books in fact.

Early in his 25-years of community gardening, his wife gave him “Square Foot Gardening” by Mel Bartholomew. Gil readily admits he was “really hooked”.

A little later he read the “Four Season Harvest” by Elliott Coleman, a professional market gardener from the state of Maine who’s developed a range of techniques that keep his garden producing year round, except for a few of the darkest and coldest weeks of the year.

The books changed Gil’s gardening life and influenced the development of the Woolwich Community Garden at the corner of First and Arthur Streets in Elmira.

The garden was started 13 years ago to fill a demand for more garden plots and to offer spots for gardeners to practice organic growing methods – a perfect fit for Gil’s passion.

“People think I’m nuts because I’m still here in the garden at the end of September and early October turfing boxes and planting. I put down a little plastic and in the spring, in early March, you’ll see sprouting start to happen. I was eating spinach this year with my wife on March 31st because of the crazy-warm spring.”

Square Foot Gardening advocates intensive, organic planting in raised wooden boxes – each square foot planted with a different crop. Gilbert was the first to use it at the site. As others began to see his results, it became more popular and three years ago the site switched to the boxed garden style.

“It fascinated people because you use less water, it’s much less work and the weeds are less of an issue.”

Gil was bitten by the gardening bug early in life, “As a kid we had a program at our church which was equivalent to Scouting, because we had badges and stuff. I did my gardening badge when I was eleven or twelve and that’s what got me hooked.”

“Later when we had our children, I would bring the guys out and the rule was they had to help for fifteen minutes. I would have my little egg timer and they would help pick potato bugs or pull some weeds.”

“It gave them a taste and it actually pays off.” Gil’s eldest son now works a plot community garden in Waterloo where he practices the Square Foot method.

Gil loves his day-job. It’s “wonderful work, very satisfying but in the end you’ve got nothing tangible.”

His garden fulfills him in a different way, “you put in some time, a little work and you get something tangible – a yummy vegetable.”
Gardener Profile: Maurie and Donna

There is more to Maurie and Donna’s garden at Luther Village than the soil they cultivate and the plants they lovingly tend. Their garden is a measure of their life together.

It began on Oxford St., Winnipeg when they first married in 1957.

“We had an old house with a big huge yard and we started to grow,” says Maurie in an interview with the Community Gardening Storytelling Project in August 2012.

From Winnipeg to Edmonton to Montreal to Brantford and finally to Waterloo Region, Maurie and Donna gardened together.

“We love creating. My wife loves gardening. We’re a great pair. Now we’re really into the vegetables. We started that here nine years ago.”

With the skills and passion they had developed over the years, Maurie and Donna set about improving their plot at Luther Village, adding a wooden border and digging in loads of triple mix and compost.

“Then my neighbours asked if I would do it for them. Now I’ve done over eighty borders! Everyone started wanting their gardens looking as nice as their neighbours; so I hauled in compost and triple mix. I have probably brought 500 carloads of compost to this garden over the years.”

It wasn’t long before Donna and Maurie became the garden coordinators and as the garden flourished so did the community around it.

“It’s a community project that has developed into a social activity. There are fifty members here I think. We have 100 plots including the perennials. I think this is the biggest social activity in Luther Village. People are here all the time. We’re pretty proud of it.”

“People now come down and sit on the benches and watch their garden grow!”

They handed over the coordinator duties about three years ago. Donna is no longer able to work their garden plot. She has trouble walking and kneeling so she uses a scooter to get around, but she and Maurie are still able to spend time together in the garden.

Luther Village recently installed concrete sidewalks around the perimeter and down the centre of the site. Now Donna’s scooter can easily navigate the garden plots.

“Since we’re retired, you don’t have much to do. We come here and we have something to do. The garden needs us.”

“We had been such avid gardeners; we thought it was too bad to leave it. When we saw this and thought about the potential, we thought we were so lucky! It’s turned out better than we thought.”
Gardener Profile: Sarbast

Sarbst remembers being 14-years-old and living at his family home in Baghdad, Iraq.

“We belonged to Kurdish people. Kurdish people are from the north of Iraq, most of them farm and garden ... So when we bought our house in 1973 we built from scratch and started to build a garden. We mapped it and planned it. We made it a good garden.”

He worked in the garden with his father, gaining experience – even becoming an expert beekeeper after finding a colony in the garden and moving them to a hive.

Sarbast left his home in Iraq in 1994, moved to Jordan and from there to Canada in 2000 to study at the University of Waterloo. He’s lived in the Sunnydale neighbourhood in north Waterloo since 2002.

His beekeeping days are behind him now. It’s just too complicated to raise bees and make honey in Canada, says Sarbast.

But he did return to gardening in 2004 when he got one of the 10 plots available at Sunnydale Community Garden. Before long he was deeply involved in running the garden, taking on site coordinator duties for three years from 2006 to 2009.

Sarbst learned that communicating and navigating cultural difference was part of life in the garden.

“Some of them (gardeners) are from different cultures or don’t speak English well. Most are seniors. How do you communicate with them? For me it is not easy.”

The plants seem to transcend these barriers however. “Each one of us plants things related to their background or country. For example, some Chinese guys plant some things; we didn’t know what they were; so we’ll ask and see how they use it.”

The Sunnydale garden continues to improve the quality of life for Sarbast and his family:

As a source of healthy food.
“At first it was to get some vegetables from the garden to support myself. I know it’s probably a small portion of financial aid, but it helps. And it is fresh.”

“My wife, last year felt like she had diabetes. Now she has to eat more vegetables like squash. It can get expensive. So now I planted more for her.”

As a way to build connections to the community.
“This summer the Waterloo Regional Police and Tim Hortons had a bike contest for kids who volunteered. So my son volunteered at the garden. He brought the hose, removed the garbage, and I taught him things.”

Or simply as a way to relax and be active.

“You learn to be patient. I’ve come here for a couple hours sometimes just taking these weeds. You do some digging and some cleaning. You change your body with movement and exercising.”
Gardener Profiles: Waterloo Region Homes for Mental Health

The seed of an idea Shannon Knutson planted in 2011 blossomed into a community project that improves the health of people using services at the Waterloo Region Homes for Mental Health (WRHMH).

Shannon, a recreation therapist, was looking for a way to get members of the WRHMH community up and moving as part of a wellness program. She heard some of the people liked gardening, so she secured a single plot at the Good Earth Community Garden on Willow Street in Waterloo and set up a weekly gardening program.

By the start of the growing season for 2013, the garden had grown to three plots and a group of dedicated gardeners were up and moving.

Motivated by a winter’s worth of anticipation, they begin weekly meetings in early May to map the garden, select plants and prepare the soil for the coming year. Their enthusiasm continues to the last days of the season in October.

The benefits of gardening reach beyond the tilling of the soil and growing of vegetables. It enhances their health and creates a community that might otherwise not exist for people who experience mental health issues.

The WRHMH gardeners talked about their experiences during an interview with the Community Garden Storytelling Project last August.

Matthew likes seeing friends and socializing. “Two years ago, I suffered from deep depression. Actually, I didn’t want to go anywhere; I didn’t want to see anyone and now, I think I’m changing some. I’m just glad I am coming here – to do anything.”

“It gets me out of the house,” says Ellie, “and it’s better for me than staying at home; I like being with people; I like to see things grow too.”

“And the physical work is like a high,” adds George. “I feel good.”

For the gardener the rich social life is further enhanced by working as a group. Shannon says the teamwork is a big motivator, “we come together as a group and it just happens ... that’s how we get the magic to happen.”

(Continued on Next Page)
Matthew echoes this. “... when you are working with other people, you are getting more out of it.”

Working together brings back good memories.
“I grew up in St. Jacobs and I come from a very large family,” Ellie says, “My mom and dad had a very large garden and planted food there; so we’d have enough to eat through the winter ... that’s where I first learned how to do some gardening.”

Howard not only remembers his family “had a garden when my parents lived in my hometown,” but also he worked on two strawberry farms in June 1972 and a cucumber farm in 1970.

“My dad always had a garden on our farm; and then when I was older, I joined the junior agriculturalists and had a garden through them,” adds Winona.

The group shares the bounty of the garden, taking home produce when it’s available. Each week they learn about a different vegetable and join in garden-side cooking demonstrations planned by Shannon.

Harvest dinners, held twice per year, are the highlight of the gardening season. Shannon organizes the dinners but everyone helps out. "We get together as a big group – 20 to 25 and we cook. So we plan a menu around what we’ve got and we buy some things to supplement it or get things from my good friend’s organic farm. We plan a whole menu and cook together and enjoy our meal.”

The Good Earth Community Garden is a special place for group members:
Matthew: “I like the peaceful environment ... you can hear the beautiful birds singing ... it’s very calm.”

Marta: “It’s such a nice spot ... I think it’s like visiting our own little park where we can see some of our produce growing too; I like that part of it a lot”

Shannon: “It resonates through the day ... we see them and you can tell. They have the glow – the gardening afterglow.”
Gardener Profiles: Clark

In the soft light of a summer evening, it’s easy to forget that Victoria Hills community garden is pinched into a strip of green between a busy section of Victoria Street and a creek near Westmount Road in Kitchener.

In the slanting light near the end of day, you notice the gentle slope of the site, the shape of the plants and gardeners outlined against a backdrop of trees.

Clark is often among these gardeners; he’s been a member here since 2008 when he planted his first garden.

“I grew up in a rural area in China. My parents are teachers. But, my uncles and others (relatives) had a garden. I have been to my relatives’ garden and helped them with some work.”

“Gardening in China is a necessity because some people won’t have food to eat without a garden. In Canada gardening is similar to a luxury because we can live without it, but a garden brings lots of joy to us.”

In the summer Clark estimates half his family’s vegetables come from his garden. He grows chives, garlic, leeks, tomatoes and celery – common vegetables in China’s Shandong province where he grew up. The harvest has changed the way the family eats. There was a time when he couldn’t have a meal without meat, says Clark. Now, it’s not always on the menu.

“Also, you eat fresh, organic produce which tastes better than (food) purchased in the grocery store. If we harvest too many vegetables, we will give them to our friends and they are very happy.”

And it is the bond between friends that make the garden greater than the sum of all its parts. Members meet each April to divvy up tasks and share growing tips. In autumn they share the clean up and celebrate the season.

“It brings people from different cultures together and enhances community building. Therefore, by gardening we get to know each other.”

Clark’s children often come to the garden with him. “They helped me with watering the vegetables and they learned from watching what I do. They learned about the names of the vegetables and when to start planting. They also play with other kids here.”

For Clark his garden holds a place close to his heart, “Some people may be interested to visit ancient architectures in a big city, whereas others may enjoy traveling in the countryside. For me, I enjoyed the lifestyle of gardening.”

“Life would have less joy without the community garden.”
Gardener Profiles: Gary

When Gary Bonnell was a child, he’d walk a couple of blocks to his Grandpa’s home where he’d snack on berries while they worked together in the big backyard garden on Wellington Street.

Years later, the lessons he learned from his grandfather not only helped Gary start his first garden at the Beaver Creek community garden, but also influenced his choice to move to the housing cooperative in northwest Waterloo.

“That was one of the selling points for me moving here because they had these community gardens.”

Grandpa’s lessons are still part of Gary’s gardening practice “like how to tie fruit and when to fertilize.” However, part of the attraction of the community garden is the chance “to learn tricks from other gardeners.”

“I grow vegetables like zucchini, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers and garlic because my family likes to eat them.”

“I’ve learned from a few of the elders. I’ve actually gotten plants from them to try new vegetables. We have this thing called ground cherries and I’d never had them before and I would’ve never known I liked them if I didn’t have a community garden.”

Gary is also passing on a few tricks of his own, “New people moved into the plot beside me and I’ve been mentoring them this year. I helped them prepare the soil.”

“We grow organically here so it’s all manure and compost. There’s no artificial stuff used. Teaching people to compost in their community gardens is good - so people don’t have to depend on fertilizers to make their soils rich.”

Like his grandpa, Gary is cultivating the tradition of gardening in his family.

“I can teach my children the values of being able to grow their own food and know what they’re eating and not be so dependent on the grocery store.”

“They help water and plant. At the end of the year, they help me do the composting of the leftover plants which we break up and put in the soil. It teaches them new things to do. When they’re bored they don’t mind gardening with dad.”

The lessons extend to the Bonnell family dinner table as well, “I don’t eat half as much fast food anymore. I don’t eat at restaurants. My wife likes to cook more because she can just come to the garden rather than go to the grocery store.”

“You don’t need that much space to feed a family of four. It’s very valuable to me.”

Gardening also brings a deeper meaning to life for Gary, “I think the city should get involved in having community gardens in every neighbourhood because it’s a great meeting place. You get to meet your neighbours and befriend them. It makes it a nicer world to live in and you learn some stuff at the same time.”

“It’s made me more mellow; it’s peaceful.”
Appendix 4: Methodology

An ethnographic interview approach was used, in which meanings and themes emerge from stories that people tell. With this approach, people were asked to tell how gardening has fit into their daily lives and how it influenced them and their experience of food.

Overall 84 gardeners were interviewed in a wide range of community garden locations, including gardeners with mobility challenges, gardeners with low income, newcomers, seniors, parents, and others.

Data collection was carried out in two stages:

The initial exploratory group of 20 interviews as carried out by experienced interviewers (Ellen Desjardins and Judy Maan Miedema) with gardeners who had responded to an invitation (a poster displayed at all community gardens) to tell their stories in June, 2012.

Another 64 interviews were done over the summer of 2012 by Judy Maan Miedema, Kevan Marshall, and Sherry Zhang, by approaching gardeners in the gardens. Most of the study participants thus represent a random sample.

The researchers used a set of semi-structured questions that were developed during the initial exploratory interviews, to focus on key areas related to the gardening experience. These included the social, cultural, physical, and psychological aspects of gardening. Interviews ranged from 20 to 40 minutes. One researcher conducted interviews in Mandarin with Chinese immigrant gardeners, and later transcribed and translated them into English.

All interviews were transcribed (over 200 pages) and were analysed with Grounded Theory\(^3\), facilitated with NVivo 8 software.

The following graphs indicate the diversity in the sample of 84 gardeners interviewed.

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\(^3\) In a **Grounded Theory** approach to research, themes emerge in an open-ended way from participants’ narratives, serving as the groundwork for revealing meanings and contexts.
Figure 1: Age Distribution of Gardeners in the Sample

Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Gardeners in the Sample
Figure 3: Country of Birth of Gardeners in the Sample

Figure 4: Length of time lived in Canada of Gardeners in the Sample
Appendix 5: Official Plans and Community Gardens

The Region of Waterloo Official Plan has the following two statements regarding community gardens:

1. Area Municipalities will establish policies in their official plans that encourage community gardens and rooftop gardens. (3.F.3)

2. The Region will support community gardens, wherever feasible, by granting access to Regional lands, and by providing rain barrels, composting bins, compost, wood mulch or other forms of in-kind support. (3.F.4)

The following chart lists the provisions for community gardens in each of the three urban municipal Official Plans. (Long, in press)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City of Waterloo</th>
<th>City of Kitchener</th>
<th>City of Cambridge</th>
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<tr>
<td>The City will plan for neighbourhoods that provide safe and healthy living environments, and promote healthy lifestyles by supporting access to locally-grown food and by planning for community gardens, where appropriate. (3.9.2 (2) (f))</td>
<td>The City will support the creation of community gardens and other compatible forms of urban agriculture, where appropriate, and in accordance with the other policies in this Plan. (pg 38)</td>
<td>Certain land uses are permitted within all land use designations in the city, subject to the provision of adequate infrastructure, including potable water and wastewater treatment where needed... The uses generally permitted in all land use designations are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City recognizes community gardens as valuable community resources that provide open space and a local food source, offer recreational and educational opportunities, and build social connections. (8.7.4 (1))</td>
<td>Community gardens and other compatible forms of urban agriculture may be permitted in all residential areas (3.1.3)</td>
<td>e) agricultural uses including community gardens but excluding livestock operations; (8.1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City will support community gardens through initiatives which may include: promoting the awareness of community gardening; where appropriate, offering City-owned lands as new community garden sites, such as undeveloped parcels and closed road right of ways (8.7.4 (3))</td>
<td></td>
<td>The City supports a strong local food system through its Farmers’ Market, temporary farmers’ markets, and community gardens. The City recognizes that community gardens contribute to the overall parks and open space system and access to locally grown food. (7.10)</td>
</tr>
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<td>10.1 – 10.4 May be zoned to permit ...Community gardens</td>
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