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**COMMUNITY GARDENS: MORE THAN URBAN GREEN SPACES**

A group of people in New York City were starting a community garden. Long barren, the hard packed soil needed deep cultivation to loosen and break it up. When the gardeners dug down about three metres, their shovels began to bring up bricks. Looking deep into the hole, they saw people far below them walking along a train platform. The gardeners had dug right through the brick roof of a subway station.

This story was told to me by a colleague from Brooklyn Botanic Gardens but when one considers the amount of tunnelling currently underway in Sydney to create underground roadways and the increasing interest in communal gardening, it is not so far fetched as to have been set right here in this city. This paper presents a perspective on the current popularity of community gardens as seen through the eyes of an educator in a similar institution in Sydney working on a fast-growing outreach program called *Community Greening*.

Community gardens has been around for a very long time and people coming together to garden on public land is considered to have its origins in the commons of Europe and Great Britain in the early nineteenth century. Communal gardening in one form or another has been around ever since, with the latest wave of interest beginning in the 1970s. Community gardens now thrive worldwide. There can be as many different types of community gardens as there are reasons for why people participate in them. For example, organically farmed community gardens in Havana, Cuba have been responsible for feeding the 2.5 million residents since the collapse of the Soviet Union and its economic support in 1989. Community gardens in Australia and the United States address other societal issues.

Of particular relevance is a program called Green Thumb which began in New York in America in 1978. This program was initiated in response to the city's financial crisis of the 1970s which resulted in the abandonment of a tremendous amount of public and private land. The program also signalled a commitment to partnerships between government departments, businesses and the private sector. In this instance New York City Parks & Recreation and the Department of Sanitation came together to address the issue of managing an ever-increasing waste stream. Unused open spaces were made available for the local communities to turn into green havens. Residents were taught the basics of composting and, in time, other sponsors and government departments including the local botanic gardens, came on board to supply materials and horticultural advice. Now there are 750 community gardens in 5 major boroughs in New York City and about five horticulturists from the two botanic gardens (Brooklyn and New York Botanic Gardens) are employed full-time to assist in this type of community outreach.

The first Australian community garden was established in Nunawading, Melbourne in 1977 but it was the 1990s before the trend towards communal gardening really became evident. Community gardens sprang up in every State and the Australian Community Gardens Network was established. Of particular significance is the community garden project on Sydney's Waterloo Public Housing Estate. Waterloo was targeted under the NSW Department of Housing Neighbourhood Improvement Program (for 1995-1999) and three community gardens were designed and developed as a joint initiative of the NSW Department of Housing, South Sydney Council and the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of NSW.

Similar to the New York experience, the local botanic gardens came on board and the Waterloo Estate was one of the first community garden networks that the Royal Botanic Gardens & Domain Trust (the Trust) became involved with. The Trust's Community Education Unit had been running annual outreach programs, such as Arbor Day and RBG goes West, to green up school grounds since 1982 and this new form of community outreach fitted in nicely with its educational objectives.

In August 2000 a formal partnership called *Community Greening* was set up between the Trust and NSW Department of Housing (DoH). Both agencies operate statewide and the aim of the initiative was to encourage residents in DoH estates and associated school communities in urban and regional NSW to take ownership of their local environment, connect with botanic gardens, learn new skills and make friends with people from a diversity of backgrounds. The program was designed to support community gardens especially in densely populated disadvantaged areas, and to encourage involvement of local and state government bodies as well as industry and the commercial sector. *Community Greening* was acknowledged as best practice in establishing partnerships, promoting sustainability and contributing to community renewal with a Silver Award in the Social Justice Category in the NSW Premier's 2002 Public Sector Awards. In addition, recently *Community Greening* received external funding from the Premiers Department Community Solutions Fund to enable further expansion.

The Trust now employs two full time education horticulturists on the program. They work with DoH's Community Renewal Unit and Regional Coordinators and currently there are 42 community gardens either in development or established on DoH or Council land, in churches or in schools throughout NSW. *Community Greening* also has its own dedicated vehicle - covered in logos of the various sponsors who contribute seeds, plants landscape materials, signage, water saving devices etc for use by community groups. Interest in the program keeps growing.

So what lessons have been learnt after two years of direct involvement with community gardeners?

Firstly, it is difficult to define a community garden. Community gardens come in all shapes and sizes. It is neither possible nor desirable to prescribe their exact nature. Some may be reclaimed from underutilised urban land, others may be on the roof of an apartment block; while many are vegetable allotments on otherwise wasted open space, some are communal flower beds or may be sensory or bush tucker gardens in school playgrounds, or even take the form of regenerated parkland. A community garden is therefore not defined as such by the location or the types of plants found there but by the binding characteristic of people coming together to participate as a community. That is, community gardens are more about 'community' than 'gardening'.

Secondly, there are a variety of reasons why people choose to participate in community gardens. They might come because it is a place to grow nutritional fruit and vegetables, or a place to be creative, active and productive. For some it's a place to simply enjoy viewing the plants and meeting people or to experience peace and tranquillity. It might also be a place for learning.

Thirdly, although there is general acknowledgement that community gardens contribute to improving the urban landscape and social capital, it is very difficult to quantify the benefits and

directly attribute specific outcomes to them. It is difficult to set and measure performance indicators and find answers to challenging questions such as: Does community gardening translate directly into tangible economic, social and environmental benefits? Does it actually reduce crime? Does it make a neighbourhood safer? Do property values increase as a result of these greener areas?

It became blatantly clear that research and evaluation of the contribution community gardening makes to community renewal must be undertaken if funding and government commitment is to be sustained. And it is necessary to measure more than:

- the number of gardens requested and established
- the number of sponsors and other partners involved
- the number of media 'hits'
- the amount of land utilised for this purpose.

The principal partners of *Community Greening* want to find out if their contribution really is 'making a difference'. Is the Trust fulfilling its mission to inspire an appreciation and conservation of plants and are people implementing sustainable horticultural practices as a result of the program? Is DoH's Community Renewal objective to work in partnership with the community to improve the quality of life for public housing tenants being met?

The Waterloo Estate, mentioned earlier, is the subject of the first inter-departmental research in Australia looking at the role of community gardens in fostering community development and neighbourhood improvement in a public housing context. A report is about to be released by the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of NSW and *Community Greening's* evaluation will use these findings to build longitudinal data to measure long-term outcomes.

Fourthly, those of us involved in community education always marvel at how easy it is to get people excited about plants and gardening. DoH tenants are no exception. Gardening is hands-on and truly interactive and can be done by people of all ages, interest levels and ability. The rewards are instant (there's the satisfaction of successfully planting something) and ongoing (watching it grow and/or produce fruit). Many of the *Community Greening* participants don't have a language in common and they break through language barriers by communicating through 'doing'. Many tenants come from rural or agrarian backgrounds and enjoy sharing skills and approaches to gardening they have learnt in their homeland.

Finally, we have learnt that while political and economic forces certainly do determine what land and support is made available for communal gardeners, the initiative must come from the community itself. Planners, architects and others in government organisations cannot drive the process and determine where and how many community gardens will be incorporated into the urban environment. Interestingly, the *Community Greening* experience has shown that there is generally one individual in the community ('a dynamo') who is highly motivated and keen to implement the idea. If that person is supported and encouraged then the rest of the community becomes involved. Government departments, local businesses and industry can then provide materials and the essential education required to ensure horticultural success and a deeper understanding of ecological sustainability. By cutting through red tape they can help the community achieve what *the community* wants, not what the bureaucrats want or think the community needs.

Also, during the establishment of community gardens, representatives of *all* community groups must be involved or at least consulted if a project is to be accepted and not vandalised. This means strategies need to be put in place to facilitate community consultation, dispute resolution, management support and skill development.

When he was NSW Minister for Housing, Andrew Refshauge said in a television interview on Channel 9's Saturday Today Show: 'It's all about a hand up not a hand out' and that the community needs to take ownership if projects are to be truly successful and ongoing. The best community gardens are not necessarily the most aesthetically pleasing but they show signs of having been created by and for the community and there's evidence of recycling, activity and sharing. While protected by a secure fence there is generally a friendly gardener on site or nearby to interact with anyone who approaches.

In conclusion, while communal gardening on public land might not be the panacea to solve all that is wrong with modern society, it is a positive activity that brings together all sectors of the community (individual residents, government departments and private enterprise) and sets the stage for open communication on all sorts of issues. This doesn't mean things can't and won't go wrong. Community gardens aren't wanted everywhere and this must be respected. The biggest challenges for cities will be to keep the interest up in established community gardens, say five years on, or to keep the land out of the hands of developers. The latter is a problem New York community gardens faced in the late 1990s and fundamentally solved by establishing not-for-profit Trusts for Public Lands.

In summary, to ensure ongoing communal green spaces in our cities, we must never lose sight of the need for community gardens to be community driven, nor the need to keep governments committed and involved. In successful partnerships *all* participants feel a sense of ownership, have a meaningful role to play and can see the value of their contribution. We must not become complacent about the security of tenure. Who could have stopped the closure of our inner city schools where community gardens had been developed years before as part of Arbor Day celebrations? However, by providing environmental education and fostering a *love of gardening* we can empower individuals to create their own futures and help develop a society that values and demands safe common green spaces in our cities.

Biography:

**Janelle Hatherly** is Community Education Manager at the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney where she is responsible for the development and management of a wide range of community and school education programs, interpretation and volunteer services.

She has a background in science teaching and communication. Prior to joining the Royal Botanic Gardens & Domain Trust she developed public programs, exhibitions and publications on biodiversity and environmental sustainability for the Australian and Queensland Museums and Brisbane's botanic gardens.

Janelle has worked extensively with exhibition designers, landscape architects and planners to develop meaningful spaces in which to engage visitors and the community in educational experiences.