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Freddie Lin , '24

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# Philadelphia's Urban Community Gardens: Decolonization, Green Space, and Food Security

Freddie Lin '24  
Advisor: Professor Nina Johnson

May 10, 2024

*A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence. And its power goes far beyond the garden gate—once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself.*

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013)



Photo of Growing Home Garden by Freddie Lin

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## Life at the Garden

The cold winter season is still a time for work in the garden. Life may not grow and plants hide until the warm sunshine of the spring, but work at the garden continues. This past winter, I visited Growing Home Gardens—an urban garden home to mostly Asian immigrants in South Philadelphia. At this multiple plot garden squeezed between three story townhouses on all sides, over ten languages are spoken across its volunteers. During my initial visit, although the soil beds were empty, the garden was filled with life. People from the neighborhood were cleaning the space, moving wooden planter boxes and fences, and building small shelters for the winter season. Gardens require preparation and proper maintenance, even months before the next growing season. The Growing Home Garden in South Philadelphia brings life to its neighborhood, even while life underground waits to grow.

In the spring, plants are sprouting and gardeners’ spirits grow with them. A new layer of green is spread across the plot of land drawing more attention from the kids passing by on scooters with their parents. People want to be at the garden, feel the soil, and enjoy the company of their neighbors. The garden is its fullest self in the spring. The patch of urban land fulfills the hearts of those who care for it—but it doesn’t just stop there.



## Personal Context: Positionality

I lived in North Philadelphia for four months during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2021. I was a Swarthmore College freshman forced to live off campus and take only online classes for typical pandemic reasons. Somehow, I ended up living in a small apartment in North Philadelphia with some friends just a few blocks from Temple University's campus.

It was during this time where I became severely aware of the disparities of urban greenspace in the city. North Philadelphia felt like an urban green space desert, especially city parks. There may have been some parks, but I could clearly tell they had not been maintained and were not truly spaces meant for the community. For my dose of greenspace, I was forced to take the 20-minute subway ride into Center City then walk ten minutes to Rittenhouse Square every time I wanted to spend time surrounded by grass and trees. I realized how time consuming and difficult it was to access these greenspaces and it was only because I was a student taking virtual classes with the time to go downtown... not a working adult with a family to feed and care for.

This experience is what sparked my interest in access to urban greenspace and later urban agriculture and community gardens. I began this research focused specifically on urban greenspace, but as I became aware of the strong and growing gardening scene happening right where I had lived in North Philadelphia, I realized a focused approach to Philadelphia community gardening was the route I had to take. Through my research, both through reading existing academic literature and speaking to Philadelphia's community gardeners, I have been inspired by the way these communities take initiative to reclaim abandoned land for the benefits of themselves and their community as well as a form of resistance to environmental racism. As

someone concerned about the health of our planet amidst a looming climate crisis and how we as humans interact with nature in an urbanizing world, I have become fascinated by how natural urban spaces fit into the landscape of a city and how they offer far more than just food for the people involved. I believe as an outsider who is neither from Philadelphia nor has been previously involved in urban agriculture, there is a lot to be learned from the people actively stewarding small pieces of land throughout one of our country's largest cities.

## Philadelphia Context: Deindustrialization and Suburbanization

As of 2022, Philadelphia is the poorest of the most populated cities in the United States as nearly a quarter (23%) of its residents live in poverty (Pew, Philadelphia 2023: The State of the City). After World War II, Philadelphia experienced many challenges during its transition from an industrial hub along the Delaware River to a post-industrial city. For example, in Kensington, one of Philadelphia's most industrial neighborhoods, the primary factory, Stetson Hats, closed in the late 1960s forcing its 5,000 employees to find new jobs and relocate. Goode and Schneider write, "The mounting blight that accompanied the closing of factories in Kensington—high turnover, housing abandonment, dirt, vandalism, decay, graffiti—entered public discourse only in the 1970s" (Goode and Schneider, 1994). Importantly, however, the deindustrialization happening at this time never severely affected the employment levels of Black population as discriminatory employers kept many Black individuals out of industrial jobs in the first place. This only began to change as many white people fled the city for the suburbs causing the remaining factories to become desperate for labor (Goode and Schneider, 1994).

Beginning in the early 1950s, reform politics in Philadelphia began as a response to the decrease in the manufacturing industry that thrived during the war. In 1951, Democrat Joseph Clark was elected as mayor, along with fifteen other Democrats elected to City Council, and

spearheaded lofty urban renewal goals to “remove outdated structures from the downtown area and to replace them with office towers, luxury housing, university expansion, and specialized shops” (Adams et al., 1991). While his efforts of urban renewal in Center City were successfully implemented until the early 1980s, surrounding neighborhoods, especially those of primarily black and brown residents, did not experience any of the same benefits. Adams et al. write that many neighborhoods in Philadelphia “have simply become disconnected from the structures of opportunity” as the focus of renewal was strictly centered around downtown’s central business district leaving neighborhood renewal initiatives virtually non-existent.

The lack of neighborhood attention happening during the transition to post-industrialism caused many of the wealthier, middle and upper-class white residents to leave the city and disperse into the suburbs. Adams et al. explain, “by 1960 the suburbs had gained more than half of the region's residents; by 1980 the suburban share had grown to almost two-thirds of the total population.” At this time, amongst suburbanization and urban population decline, minority residents disproportionately remained in the city. The effects of postindustrial suburbanization in the 1970s led to an 11.9 percent job decrease in the city of Philadelphia compared to the average decrease of 6.2 percent for cities nationwide. Additionally, during the Reagan administration, federal revenue for the city of Philadelphia was cut from 25.8 percent in 1979 to 7.5 percent in 1988. The lack of federal support, along with the city’s heavy reliance on its local tax base—more than any other large city in the nation—resulted in Philadelphia’s 1990 fiscal crisis which required desperate bailout policies to keep the city afloat (Goode and Schneider, 1994).

Aligning with the information presented above, the 2023 “State of the City” report conducted by Pew Charitable Trusts shows that Black people currently make up the largest share of Philadelphia’s population at 38.6%. White people make up 33%, Hispanics make up 15.9%,

Asians make up 7.5%, while 5.1% are reported as ‘other.’ Within these populations, 28.3% of Black people, 30% of Hispanics, and 22.7% of Asians in Philadelphia all live below the poverty line. Unsurprisingly, poverty and environmental justice are closely related in Philadelphia. Urban sociologist and environmental justice scholar, Diane Sicotte writes, “there were disproportionately more African Americans, Hispanics, manufacturing workers, and economically disadvantaged people living near the worst of the hazardous facilities than there were near the less hazardous facilities” (2016). The health and livelihood of marginalized groups in Philadelphia has long been overshadowed by industrial manufacturing and hazardous facilities that fail to consider the people directly harmed by their existence.

Furthermore, for these communities living below or near the poverty line, food insecurity and access to green space remain crucial problems that many communities continue to experience. In a 2021 food security study by Feeding America, it was found that 13.6% of Philadelphia’s population does not have access to affordable and healthy food options.<sup>1</sup>

## Literature Review

The growth of urbanization and urban density on a global scale has raised the issue of land use and how public access to greenspace fits into city planning policies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Scholars of urban environmental justice have shown that marginalized groups are particularly at risk since their neighborhoods are most often located in the most polluted and industrialized areas in the city with the least amount of greenspace, street tree cover, and city parks (Anguelovski et al., 2018). Furthermore, Black, low-income, and immigrant neighborhoods in

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<sup>1</sup><https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/overall/pennsylvania/county/philadelphia>



the United States are prone to higher concentrations of fast-food restaurants and lower concentrations of supermarkets with fresh produce options (Gripper et al., 2022).

This lack of access to green space and fresh food is a product of environmental racism defined by Robert Bullard as “any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color. It also includes exclusionary and restrictive practices that limit participation by people of color in decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies” (Bullard, 1993). As a response to environmental and structural racism, cities across the United States have seen an increase in the presence of urban farming and gardening, most often initiated by marginalized groups, to create their own forms of access to fresh food, greenspace, and community spaces that otherwise are not available to them. Additionally, studies have shown that “community gardening is linked to more fruit and vegetable consumption, lower rates of depression and anxiety, and better overall health outcomes” (Gripper et al., 2022).

Historically, white, wealthy communities and neighborhoods have benefited from higher levels of access to quality green spaces that remain properly maintained compared to low-income, minority groups. The control of access over necessary green spaces for every resident of any city is rooted in environmental racism and acts as a function of power that prioritizes capital accumulation and profits over the necessities of human life (Brownlow, 2006). Extensive environmental justice research has been conducted on Fairmount Park, Philadelphia’s largest municipal park, illuminating how the city’s decisions and use of the park result in consequences largely affecting people of color. Fairmount Park’s history of socioeconomic division dates back to the 1850s when wealthier white residents worked with the city by expanding the park into their backyards while simultaneously curbing toxic industrial development that otherwise would

have taken up that space. As a result, these white residents were able to control urban space while displacing the harm onto minority communities forced to bear the consequences of hazardous waste, pollution, and toxins with no accessibility benefits to the park (Sicotte, 2016). Because of instances like these happening all across the city throughout Philadelphia's renewal phase into the current day, community gardens have served as valuable resources to counter the harms of environmental racism.

This growing recognition of such environmental injustice and institutional power dynamics over urban space has led to several community-led efforts to turn previously abandoned and ignored urban areas into gardens that provide the community with fresh food, green space, and community gathering space. Furthermore, in efforts to dismantle effects of structural racism, Gripper writes, "many members within Black communities grow food as a strategy of resistance to food apartheid, and for the healing and self-determination that agriculture offers" (2022). Although the intentions of growing food varies from person to person, the act of urban gardening itself is inherently an approach to dismantling food apartheid and community healing through engaging with nature, connecting with the community members, and rebuilding community spaces by transforming abandoned lots into beautiful gardens.

In Philadelphia, community gardening has played a crucial role in the city's history of urban agriculture, primarily through the work of minority communities. The city is home to roughly 264 recognized community gardens and farms and an additional 29 "social gardens" which are community-led greenspaces that typically do not produce food, but rather provide greenspaces for neighborhoods to share (Philadelphia Parks and Recreation, 2023). These community-formed gardens and green spaces have become historically necessary due to the lack of neighborhood renewal initiatives during Philadelphia's renewal phase from the 1950s to the

1980s. They are also largely attributed to the Great Migration when many Black people from the south moved to Philadelphia and other industrialized northern cities. During this transitional period, Black farmers from the South brought farming traditions to the North to escape exploitative sharecropping as well as “white terrorism, Jim Crow laws, [and] USDA discrimination” (Gripper, 2022). From 1920 to 1997, the amount of Black farmers nationwide decreased by 95% and roughly 80-90% of rural Black farmland was stolen (Gripper, 2022). Due to the forced urbanization of many black farmers, Gripper makes clear that farming for Black people has been historically significant and is not a new found solution to the lack of food and green spaces in cities today. She writes, “While some dominant modern narratives talk about urban agriculture as an innovative way to build community and fight food insecurity, Black folks in this country have been growing food in cities for as long as they have lived in cities. Before that, our ancestors lived in deep relationship with the land” (2020). Thus, urban farming and gardening is a culturally significant practice that has been passed down through generations of Black urban residents. These spaces have also developed and been strengthened by immigrants who come to Philadelphia from across the world and look for ways to preserve their cultural traditions through the growth of food native to their home countries (Philadelphia Parks and Recreation. 2023).

Sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo spent over a year conducting ethnographic fieldwork and research on immigrant relationships with community gardens in Los Angeles. She further argues that gardening for immigrants is more than simply a space to produce and provide food. In her work, she explores how “immigrant community gardeners are creating new homes, attachments, and means of livelihood that link their past with the present, restoring them during this historical moment of the US immigration crisis in deportations and detentions” (2017). She

emphasizes the importance of community gardens in the immigrant experience of new home-making as well as a form of connection to their homeland and culture through the food they grow. Even more, these spaces have the potential to serve as a form of poverty alleviation by growing fresh produce much cheaper than it can be bought.

Furthermore, Monica White has thoroughly explored the effects of urban gardening, primarily surrounding women activists based in Detroit. She writes, in her work titled “Sisters of the Soil,” that these women claim “that the earth is an ally in the struggle for liberation because it provides a living learning space and a refuge for communities that experience racial and economic apartheid” (2011). Through this, White gives agency to land and views it as a living breathing thing that supports the struggle for liberation. She demonstrates how urban community gardening and the land these gardens rest on is foundational to decolonization efforts that have worked towards the liberation of Black, Indigenous, and other non-white people for decades.

Despite the various benefits that come with community gardens, they remain highly susceptible to dispossession as many exist on private land that can become attractive to investors looking to transform the space into high-end housing estates, restaurants, and retail shops. As a result, not only does the garden disappear, but surrounding rent prices increase, ultimately leading to the gentrification and displacement of the community. Even more paradoxical, sometimes these gardens lead to making the surrounding area more prone to gentrification, thus displacing the individuals the gardens were originally intended for (Anguelovski et al., 2018). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the “green space paradox” (Wolch et al., 2014) or “ecological gentrification” (Dooling, 2009). Currently, only 44% of community gardens in Philadelphia have secure rights or full ownership of their land. An additional 31% of these gardens are not secure but are in a strong position to have complete protection and conservation.

The remaining 25% of gardens are at high risk of dispossession and most likely demolition for the sake of urban development if no legal action is taken. Part of this study seeks to understand how residents in Philadelphia respond when their gardens are at risk of housing or corporate development.

Focusing on the city of Philadelphia, my research explores how communities aim to mitigate the green space paradox through community gardens created on vacant lots. Are these spaces part of the answer to decolonization and food insecurity? How do community gardeners view and understand the gardening work they are involved in? Finally, even when the city's interest is against these communities, how do they demonstrate their resilience and create their own access to spaces necessary for improved health and well-being?

## Methodology

Using research conducted primarily through interviews and online case studies, my research project aims to explore how residents in Philadelphia, who lack access to formal, city-owned green space, respond to their lack of access through the creation of community gardens. What happens once a community garden is created and how do these communities deal with the rights to their often informally acquired land?

Philadelphia has a wide array of community gardens across the city demonstrating the resiliency and initiative taken by communities that otherwise have little access to necessary greenspace. Inspired by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's methodological approach of extensive ethnographic field research and interviews in her Los Angeles-based study titled "At home in inner-city immigrant community gardens" I wanted to approach my research similarly. She writes, "I wanted to understand the social relationships that form in these places and the

meanings participants held about both materiality and social relations in these community gardens.”<sup>2</sup> Considering this statement, I reached out to over fifteen organizations in Philadelphia whose mission is to provide safe access to green spaces and healthy food options for members of their communities. Of the gardens and organizations I contacted, only five volunteers were available to be interviewed, but all five shared valuable stories and experiences that can be applied to understand how community gardens serve as vital spaces in the make-up of Philadelphia’s urban landscape.

Using a qualitative methodology of analyzing focused interviews for key themes of my research, I was particularly interested in learning about the individuals' relationships with city-owned public parks and greenspaces and what makes community gardens a necessary addition to their neighborhoods. As I became more aware of the impacts of community gardens and developed a better understanding of the uplifting and interconnected gardening spaces in the area, I was able to engage in more meaningful conversations/interviews with my research participants. Qualitative analysis, through semi-structured interviews, was most useful throughout my study as it allowed me to understand the social, emotional, and health-based effects of these gardens on individuals in the community. It also introduced me to the large web of shared resources many Philadelphia urban gardeners have created for other gardeners hoping to create or sustain their spaces. Additionally, because my research covers many different gardens led by various ethnic communities across Philadelphia, I was able to understand how the purpose and use of these gardens changes, or remains constant, across different cultures, neighborhoods, and groups in the city. For the privacy and safety of my interview participants, all names have been left anonymous.

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<sup>2</sup> Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. 2017. At home in inner-city immigrant community gardens. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 32(1), 13–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44983729>

# Chapter 1: Community Resources and Case Studies

I had originally entered my research interested in exploring Philadelphia's access to urban greenspace in general. However, after beginning research and conducting interviews, I realized how unique and crucial community gardens specifically are to many neighborhoods across the city. Although there are multiple city-owned and operated parks across Philadelphia, surrounding residents are forced to exist in those spaces in very specific and controlled ways. Community gardens are spaces operated by the community *for* the community allowing residents to have complete agency over how the space is used and the purpose they are intended to serve. One garden volunteer at Iglesias Garden in Kensington, a neighborhood in northeast Philadelphia<sup>3</sup>, points out:

There are some small parks [in the area], but those are not places where you can grow food and steward the land yourself. They're not places where you can go and just be yourself and not feel kind of policed or surveilled. In those public spaces that are owned by the city, there's just a bit of attention as to who gets to use the space and who owns it. The gardens, on the other hand, are explicitly by and for the community, like this is *your* space. Parks are okay, they matter and are really important, but they're owned by the city and there's only certain uses that are allowed. I'd say in other parts of the city gardens are even more so the only green space around.

Recognizing this, my research focus shifted away from greenspace more broadly, towards a specific emphasis on community gardens and their power to shape and influence urban neighborhoods and communities. As mentioned in the Literature Review, most community gardens were created out of abandoned urban lots that community members believed they could turn into beautiful and sustainable spaces to grow their own food, trees, and flowers. The same

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2024/02/20/1232496906/addiction-opioid-overdose-kensington-philadelphia-zombie-trang>

volunteer mentioned above also points out the important history of community gardens and how they continue to be a crucial part of neighborhoods across Philadelphia:

Community gardens popped up not because people had permission, but because there was this critical need in communities that had been just gutted by redlining and disinvestment. The city demolished a ton of housing stock left on vacant land that nobody maintained. The owners were either deceased, had left, or stopped paying taxes, so the neighbors put it on themselves if nobody else was going to do anything. They put their own time in, their own money, their own blood, sweat and tears and made beautiful spaces throughout the city independent of each other, but it's amazing that there is this strong culture of gardening. And this was also at a time when a lot of this land really wasn't valuable and that's why it was abandoned in the first place. (Volunteer, Iglesias Garden)

This volunteer demonstrates the common theme across Philadelphia's urban gardens: a community-wide desire for cleaner and greener neighborhoods. In both quotes from above, this volunteer shows how community members are made to not only clean up areas of the city that do not belong to them, but also create greenspace and collaborative, community-based environments using their own time, money, and energy. In many neighborhoods where community gardens are most prevalent, residents lack support from the city for fundamental necessities such as green space and a clean environment. Furthermore, as will be explored throughout this study, community gardens offer more to the community than just access to greenspace and fresh food; they act as important and open spaces for social interaction between friends, guests, and neighbors who do not have the space in their homes and apartments to adequately host one another (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017). Ultimately, they serve as spaces, primarily used and cared for by residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods, to collectively reclaim land from the city making it their own space under the control of no one but themselves.

After having spoken to various community garden leaders and organizers throughout Philadelphia, I was directed to many of the crucial online resources circulating amongst the



community gardens in the city. The following sections are detailed case studies and analyses of the various resources open to gardeners in Philadelphia, along with specific stories of gardens that have struggled for land security, highlighting the collaborative energy shared between urban gardeners across Philadelphia.

## **Soil Generation: Agroecology and Threatened Gardens Guide**

Soil generation is the leading resource and network for primarily black and brown urban farmers in Philadelphia. Their mission statement reads:

We at **Soil Generation** are a Black & Brown agroecology coalition of women farmers and organizers working to ensure people of color regain community control of food and land, protect and commune with the land, share resources, grow food, and prioritize community healing.

We do this work through relationship building, honoring culture, community education, organizing, activism, and advocacy: A People's Agroecology.<sup>4</sup>

Their emphasis on community and relationship building is a primary effect of these urban spaces which Soil Generation seeks to disseminate across city residents and the government to ensure urban garden communities have a voice in city planning agendas. Their term "Agroecology" is a grassroots understanding of urban land use for the sake of gardening and community building. The idea is what guides the gardens connected with Soil Generation and influences how land is used by the people. On their website, the term's definition reads: "Agroecology [is] an autonomous, community led process that values ancestral practices of growing food and community organizing with cultural significance. Communities determine how they will recover or maintain land, retain the cultural integrity of their neighborhoods and work towards food sovereignty."<sup>5</sup> Within the scope of Agroecology also lies their term "Afroecology" which

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<sup>4</sup><https://soilgeneration.org/about-us>

<sup>5</sup><https://soilgeneration.org/ag-test>

specifically refers to Afro-Indigenous understandings of sacred land and relating with the land through kinship and reciprocity. Community garden organizations in Philadelphia exist with highly intentional frameworks such as Agroecology and Afroecology because, as Ashley Gripper writes, they offer ways “to engage with the disturbing history of this country.” She further writes that, “we live in a place built on stolen Indigenous land and the brutal enslavement and stolen labor of my ancestors. It opens the door to us understanding how this all shapes our collective journey toward liberation” (2020). For Soil Generation, urban gardening is more than simply growing food, it is a step toward a collective liberation.

Among one of the most significant resources found on Soil Generation’s website is a 70-page “Soil Generation Threatened Gardens Guide.” This guide, published by “a coalition of Philadelphia organizations and individuals who support equity and social justice for community-managed green space, gardens, and farms through advocacy, grassroots organizing, and community education” aims to help existing, and newly established, community gardens through the process of legal land acquisition. In the guide's introduction, the authors write, “while we originally thought this guide would be helpful for gardeners whose land was on the line, the stories we heard helped us realize that organizing your garden toward longevity and community building could be helpful much, much earlier.” According to a volunteer at Iglesias Garden, who has since become passionately involved in providing legal help to various land-insecure community gardens in Philadelphia: “most times a garden is insecure because most of them don’t ask for permission, mainly because there was no one trying to do anything else with the land that was abandoned in the first place.” This informal acquisition often leads to trouble after years of use when developers are interested in using the land for new urban development. Thus, gardens and community members who have successfully gone through the process of formally acquiring

their land have provided this plan to help gardens strategically begin the process of land security and longevity.

This is the most useful document to allow for the creation, growth, and expansion of community gardens in the Philadelphia area. This document ranges from functional organizational advice regarding how to properly store tools and setting up compost systems, to building a relationship with the community's council person, legal acquisition, insurance, and more. The remaining 20 pages of the document consist of stories of Philadelphia urban gardens that have overcome, and been lost to urban development. One successful story is the Manton Street Community Garden which explains how the garden was created by the community. Mark Berman, a dedicated member of the Manton Street Garden is quoted in the guide:

There was no solid vision until the neighborhood met. The first meeting had a good turnout. Everyone listened to everybody; there were no fixed ideas. Neighbors wanted to have a cleanup and wanted to turn the corner lot into a garden. We met one week later for clean up and then every week after that. That sort of consistent visibility is key. Being out there is key. Transparency is key. Make signage and public information for your garden! It is your presence when you can't be there. Always provide contact info.

Mark demonstrates the informal beginnings of this initially abandoned street corner through determined and consistent community collaboration. People saw the space as abandoned, talked it out, and worked together to create a beautiful and necessary garden space. This is just one example of the many positive and uplifting stories that community gardeners feel inclined to share with other urban gardeners beginning their gardens. Storytelling serves as a powerful tool among the urban gardening community in Philadelphia to grow and uplift the garden scene across the city. Mark shares the story of his beloved garden while simultaneously offering advice to people interested in creating one in their own neighborhood. The interests of gardeners in Philadelphia lie in the collective success of all community gardens because the more people who

benefit from and are positively affected by community gardens, the more recognition they receive from the city. The reciprocity and interconnectedness between gardens and gardeners in the city is a crucial element to their existence in a landscape that so often prioritizes urban development.

In addition to the successful garden stories, Soil Generation's guide also highlights gardens across the city that have been threatened by development, but remained active at the time the document was published in 2016. One story is of the Emerald Street Urban Farm told by Elisa Ruse-Esposito:

At Emerald Street we are on 5 parcels 2 are privately owned and 3 are owned by different city agencies. We have had numerous meetings with Councilwoman Sanchez's Office and Jennifer Kates, and they have been really helpful, however, there appears to be nothing we can do at the moment.

The private lots would need to be forced to sheriff sale but we don't have the capital to buy them and then even if the city agencies were behind preservation we would have to consolidate the lots and find a nonprofit to hold title. As of now we don't have the capacity to go through that process. The only upside is that the process would be just as difficult and time consuming for a developer, but I guess the difference is that they would have the capital to make it happen.

All in all, we just keep building community support for the project and try to connect with as many community groups and neighborhood institutions as possible.

Elisa demonstrates how there are possible pathways for gardens to claim the rights to their land, though oftentimes these pathways require large sums of money that, as a volunteer operation, many are unable to pay. In some cases, gardens are able to fundraise to reach the sheriff sale cost, but at such a high price, many fundraisers also fall short (as demonstrated in Kentie's story below). Elisa's story emphasizes the importance of community collaboration and support necessary to fight against gentrification and urban development.

The guide also highlights two gardens that have lost their land. They tell a story about a garden on 36th & Spring Garden that had been active for 17 years until 2013 when heavy

development was occurring in the area. The guide highlights the main gardener on the land, Kentie, and her experience during the development process:

Kentie learned the lot had been purchased because she saw a zoning hearing notice on the fence of a neighbor's lot. She went to the zoning meeting and found out that this developer had bought the lot. He offered to help her move to another lot that he owned when he developed this one, but they were not good for gardening. Kentie found land that her friends owned to move the garden to at 52nd and Lancaster.

Kentie wishes she had known about the Neighborhood Garden Trust earlier; they could have helped if the lot had not been bought. Stronger communication and organization among the gardeners would have made a difference. They had a fundraiser for the new garden with five reggae bands, but it wasn't well attended and they only ended up raising \$300. Now she needs access to a pickup truck to help her finish moving pavers and soil. She doesn't have a computer or use e-mail, so she's been accessing PUFN through friends. She would like to have a raised bed building party in her new space, as well as a seedling potluck.

Soil Generation's guide was created so stories like Kentie's have a smaller chance of happening in the future. Despite recognizing the inevitability of some urban gardens being subject to removal for the sake of urban development, this guide exists so people threatened by garden removal, like Kentie, are aware of land security methods, such as the Neighborhood Garden Trust Mentioned in the story. The following section explores Philadelphia's Neighborhood Garden Trust and its contributions to urban garden land security across the city.

## **Neighborhoods Garden Trust (NGT)**

Neighborhoods Garden Trust (NGT) is a land trust that has been committed to preserving and protecting community gardens across Philadelphia since 1986.<sup>6</sup> In 2012, the organization partnered with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) receiving administrative and technical support for the preservation of these community spaces. PHS is yet another resource

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.ngtrust.org/history/>

for Philadelphia’s gardens that uses horticulture to benefit the ecosystem and people within the Philadelphia region.<sup>7</sup> Their involvement with urban community gardens, however, is primarily through collaboration with Neighborhood Gardens Trust. According to one volunteer I spoke with, NGT has a strong board largely consisting of volunteer farmers and their website says they currently protect 52 gardens “ranging from single house lots to our largest 3.7 acre growing space.”<sup>8</sup> A screenshot of their About page illustrates the essence of the organization thoroughly.



**ABOUT NEIGHBORHOOD GARDENS TRUST**

The Neighborhood Gardens Trust (NGT) is Philadelphia's neighborhood garden protector. We are a land trust dedicated to preserving and supporting community gardens and other shared open spaces across the city. NGT's work is grounded in the belief that an equitable and sustainable city is one in which all neighborhoods have vibrant green spaces for residents to cultivate food, flowers, and community.

NGT works with self-organized gardeners, community organizations, property owners, and the City of Philadelphia to secure ownership or long-term leases for community-managed open spaces to prevent the threat of development or other reuse.

NGT provides community gardeners with peace of mind that the open spaces they care for will be protected for their continued use and for future generations.

NGT receives administrative and support services from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) and together we provide ongoing technical assistance and capital improvements to preserved gardens.

Although Kentie, mentioned in the story above, was not aware of Neighborhood Garden Trust at the time, many of the volunteers I spoke with said that most gardens are now aware of the organization and use it to the best of their ability. One volunteer mentioned how crucial the NGT has been for many gardens across the city to continue to exist, the only implication being that the

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<sup>7</sup> <https://phsonline.org/our-story>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ngtrust.org/gardens/>

garden itself does not own the land if protected through the trust. A garden protected through the NGT can operate independently and is not influenced by the trust, but does not have complete control over their land. In the fall of 2023, Neighborhood Gardens Trust launched a fundraising campaign called the “Gaining Ground Campaign” aiming to raise one million dollars “to purchase threatened gardens citywide before it is too late.” This campaign has already reached 90% of its goal in roughly seven months<sup>9</sup>, highlighting the strong garden support network across the city.

### **Parks and Recreation 2023 Urban Agriculture Plan: Growing From The Root**

Similarly, Philadelphia’s Parks and Recreation department has collaborated with multiple community gardens and stakeholders across the city to create an urban agriculture plan described as a “ten-year food policy road map that takes a comprehensive view of Philadelphia’s food system, touching on land, production, preparation, consumption, food waste reduction, and the people holding this system together.” This plan encompasses a wide range of attainable methods and goals for achieving a more locally-based food system in Philadelphia while simultaneously recognizing the history of the city’s urban agriculture and the influence minority communities have played in its growth and development. The plan highlights five central aspects to the purpose of creating an urban agriculture plan for Philadelphia:

1. Uplift Philadelphia’s rich history of urban farming and gardening and establish a plan in which urban agriculture contributes to the equitable development of Philadelphia over the long-term
2. Confront the legacy of structural racism and land-based oppression in the city
3. Establish a 10-year framework for investing in and supporting agriculture and food justice, and identify pathways and opportunities for the City and affiliated partners to

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.ngtrust.org/gaining-ground/>

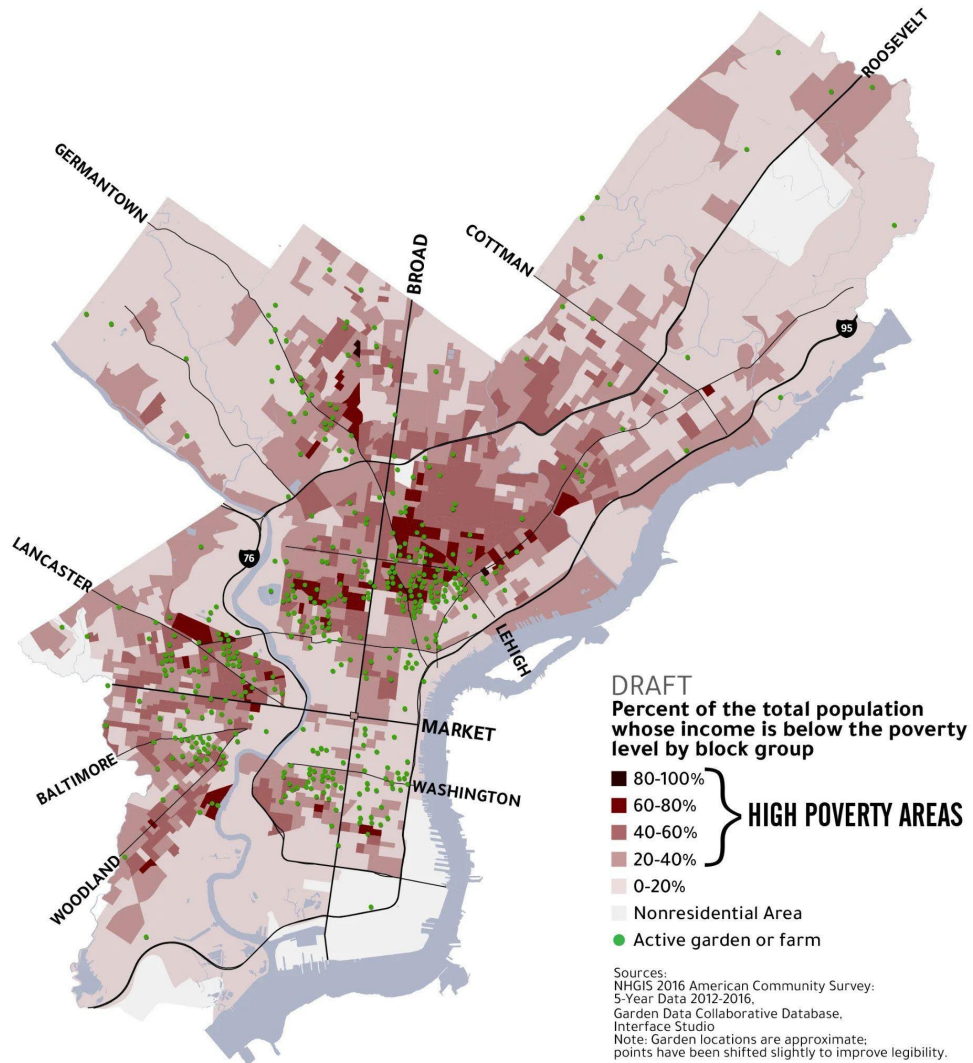
support new and existing urban agriculture projects, including community gardens, market farms, for-profit enterprises, and educational programs

4. Outline the resources, policies, processes, and programs necessary to sustain urban agriculture in Philadelphia for future generations
5. Clarify the roles that City government, nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders should play in supporting urban agriculture, and develop recommendations for implementation and evaluation of the plan

Clearly, the city recognizes the importance and inherent necessity of urban community gardens in Philadelphia. However, as this plan is published by a governmental program, the contradictions of how difficult it is for a garden to attain legal rights and security to its land remains rather paradoxical. Historically, according to Soil Generation, many of Philadelphia's urban agriculture plans and reports have severely excluded many voices of the community.

Race is a significant aspect of this plan. As mentioned in the introduction, Roughly 70% of community gardens in Philadelphia are located in areas where over 20% of the population lives in poverty and 67% of gardens are in neighborhoods of the city where people of color make up the majority of the neighborhood's population. The image below efficiently demonstrates this visually:





Ultimately, this plan is meant to serve as a resource for the gardens and gardeners in the city, however, it also emphasizes the importance it plays for the city and governmental agencies that are inclined to support the local food system and gardens across the city (Philadelphia Parks and Recreation).

### **Iglesias Garden**

Iglesias Garden, in Kensington, has formally secured their land rights and provided a comprehensible guide to the complicated process of acquiring legal land security. Their website has been cleanly and simply organized making it easy to navigate to various resources. On the

home page of their website is a mission statement in front of a large yellow sunflower from Iglesias Garden. The statement reads:

The Iglesias Gardens aims to preserve a space for the people. Through providing multigenerational activities for our community, creating harmony and balance with local ecosystems, and growing edible fruits and vegetables and plant medicine, we pay tribute to stolen land and develop a network of support for our future generations. The work of Iglesias Gardens builds and defends resilient communities.

This mission statement highlights the crucial role community gardens play in the dynamics of city life in Philadelphia. This is demonstrated through the mission statement's first line which emphasizes the spatial importance for surrounding residents. Rather than simply stating the traditional benefits of a garden, Iglesias Garden emphasizes the preservation of space for the people it is intended for. Most urban gardens in Philadelphia, including Iglesias Garden, are organized and operated by historically disadvantaged minority communities. As “[preserving] a space for the people,” Iglesias Garden is actively reclaiming land that has been stolen from minority communities for centuries. During my research process, I interviewed a member of Iglesias Garden who discussed the legal land security troubles they were forced to deal with:

My garden in Kensington was land insecure. It didn't have some type of ownership, or structure in place to protect its right to use the land. My garden in particular has multiple parcels, some of them are owned by the city, some of them are owned by developers, some of them are owned by residents who didn't pay taxes and probably, you know, either are deceased or moved out of the city.

What is particularly complicated about this situation is that, during the process of land security, the garden had to track down the different owners of the land and use different methods, organizations, and strategies to formally acquire their spaces. So far, Iglesias has bought two parcels of the land they operate on, but are still in the long and complicated process of acquiring other parcels from the city and private owners that they continue to use.

This garden exists as an integral aspect of much of the Kensington communities' daily lives. Hondagneu-Sotelo in her study of community gardens in Los Angeles explains how urban gardens serve as “hybrid-domestic spheres” where “social reproductive and restorative activities normally associated with the private domestic sphere unfold” (2017, 13). Iglesias Garden is a strong example of the domestic sphere extending to urban gardens. On the garden’s photo gallery website page, they describe what having control over land in their neighborhood means to them: “community-controlled land looks like kids hour, learning about earthworms, Aztec-inspired art and dance, fighting against gentrification, hosting community events, Saturday food distribution, and growing plant medicine and vegetables.”<sup>10</sup> Photos then demonstrate how the garden serves crucial resident needs beyond the act of growing plants and vegetables.

Iglesias Garden’s website has links to the media attention the garden has received in recent years. The most recent link is a Philadelphia Inquirer article<sup>11</sup> from 2022 highlighting the intense urban development and gentrification happening in the Kensington area and how it affects community spaces, the primary example being Iglesias Garden. The article highlights how the garden originated and what happens in the shared communal space,

[At Iglesias Garden] they grow their own vegetables such as corn, slow-cook barbacoa underground, and throw festivals. It’s become a space for the neighborhood to find reprieve in nature, connect to their Latino traditions and heritage, and build relationships with one another.

As a space for the collective neighborhood, this garden is an extension of the homes and apartments in the area where neighbors, friends, and family can connect and bond over shared cultural practices and experiences.

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<sup>10</sup><https://iglesiassgardens.com/photo-gallery/>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.inquirer.com/news/iglesias-garden-volunteers-want-lots-for-all-philadelphia-20220913.html>

## Chapter 2: Decolonization

### Reclamation of Land

Most importantly, community gardens serve as valuable sites for community members to connect with one another and cultivate a sustainable garden for their community that exists outside of harmful settler-colonial and capitalistic agendas. Through plants, community gardens bring neighbors together and serve as a space to allow individuals to slow down from an efficiency and market-based world. Cumbers et al. write, “Residents work the space and watch, in real-time, how their collective labour transforms space into place, and forges a new shared and territorially rooted identity” (143). The power of voluntary collective work towards a shared goal is a strong form of connection and community building that gives agency to the people to make the conditions of their lives and surroundings more meaningful and livable in often neglected neighborhoods. As one volunteer in West Philadelphia eloquently puts it:

[Community gardens] have given me the opportunity to connect with people who have really been harmed by colonialism, but also capitalism, but also racial capitalism and just legacies of slavery, legacies of warfare, legacies of U.S. imperial harm. So I've had the opportunity to sit and work next to people whose ancestors have been affected by these systems of power. And in the same vein, it's not like we're talking about all that harm all the time. What we're talking about is how their grandmother taught them how to make herbal medicine. And I get the opportunity to meet people who have been surviving under really harmful systems, but through grass roots practices. And so it's just giving me the opportunity to listen a lot to people who have a long history and practice of working with the land. And it's really showing me ways that can feel very liberatory and it's definitely driven my path forward in a lot of ways. I think especially with the really impending and terrifying climate crisis and also just seemingly apocalyptic political systems, growing food and growing medicine is one thing that makes sense even given all the fires burning around us. It has given me the opportunity to learn from a lot of people who I really believe in.”

This volunteer’s recognition of urban gardening as a decolonial practice itself demonstrates how epistemological knowledge production in Philadelphia’s urban gardens is based on

intergenerational and multicultural worldviews and stories that are enhanced through culturally significant plants and herbal medicine passed down through generations of families. Mishuana Goeman in her essay “Land as Life” reinforces the importance of the storytelling and teachings described in this quote as she writes, “Storytellers, in all informal and formal forms, make space come alive by imparting an anticolonial knowledge that travels and connects to other knowledge systems” (2015, 74). Living, working, and sharing stories and familial practices with other community members in the garden adds a new level to the people’s relationships with the land. The deliberate care for the land and intentional storytelling within this volunteer’s community is a crucial aspect of decolonization. Goeman further writes, “Necessary to decolonization, sovereignty or self-determination is reclaiming land physically and ideologically” (77). Not only has this volunteer and the members of his community reclaimed land physically from the city, they have prescribed it a different meaning, a different way of relating to the plot of land through the sharing of stories and cultural practices that aligns more closely with Indigenous methods of stewardship before the colonization and extraction of land in the new world.

Furthermore, this volunteer’s quote persuasively demonstrates how transformative community gardens can be in shaping new perspectives regarding the small acts of agency individuals have over the systems of power that significantly influence their lives. Ashley Gripperet al. write how these spaces serve as “a potential self-determined path to community healing and wellbeing. Since gardens tend to be concentrated in Black neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods, and areas with low food access, it is not unreasonable to suggest that community gardens and urban farms may be a response to food apartheid and structural oppression in Philadelphia” (2022). Many of the volunteers I spoke with during this study are firmly aware of this idea and work to improve and generate more of these spaces that serve as crucial responses

to forms of racial oppression in Philadelphia. As a “self-determined path to community healing and wellbeing,” these gardens are ways for the community to deconstruct the capitalistic forms of food production and spatial surveillance through reclamation of land that has been subject to over hundreds of years of white, colonial appropriation. The same volunteer demonstrates how he and the gardeners he works with are aware of how colonization shifted the way people think about land. He explains,

[T]hrough colonization, people started to engage towards land with a gaze of extraction. It's like, ‘what profit can I gain from this land?’ or ‘How can I turn a profit from buying and selling this land’ you know? A way for people to reject that kind of colonial mentality is to choose to relate to land through relationship and reciprocity as opposed to extraction... Me included, most of the people who work in community gardens and urban farms in [Philadelphia] are very interested in practicing decolonization and are large proponents of returning the land to Indigenous stewardship.

Important here is this individual’s acknowledgment of being intentional in how one chooses to understand and relate to land. Mishuana Goeman further elaborates that, “Deconstructing the discourse of property and reformulating the political vitality of a storied land means reaching back across generations, critically examining our use of the word *land* in the present, and reaching forward to create a healthier relationship for future generations” (74). This volunteer’s direct emphasis on reframing the questions of what is possible with land, away from extraction and towards reciprocal stewardship, shows how critical examinations of the word *land* have been employed across many different community gardens in Philadelphia and the country.

Gardeners recognize urban gardening as a practice that falls outside of the colonial and Western political realm. The same volunteer mentions, “I think [urban gardening] is a way for people to feel really engaged in this practice of decolonization because, yeah, okay, fine, Philadelphia owns the land or a university owns this land, but choosing to spend time on this land in a way that doesn't center profit, production, or extraction feels very subversive.” Again, it

is the reframing of the possibility and intentionality for the use of land that makes it an act of decolonization. Similarly, the volunteer from Iglesias Garden explains how holding land as an urban garden is a form of resistance. He says,

I think about the gardeners who in a way are saying ‘F private property.’ They're kind of saying, ‘I know that on paper this random person or entity owns this land, but I live here. They don't. I want my neighborhood to be beautiful. I want to steward this and put love, care, energy, and attention into it. And that gives me a claim here that gives me a right to hold this and preserve it.’

These two volunteers from very different backgrounds and neighborhoods of Philadelphia both share similar perspectives on the resistant qualities and potential that Philadelphia’s community gardens have. Following Goeman’s note that a physical reclamation also requires an ideological reclamation, the following section demonstrates how community gardens are spaces on the local level that have the power to effectively operate without overarching social controls and governance.

### **Community-owned and Operated**

As most urban gardeners have little control over the institutions and political systems they are forced to exist in, urban gardening allows these often marginalized groups to regain some of their agency through the production of food and non-surveyed social spheres. This volunteer mentions how gardeners in Philadelphia who have been affected by the history of colonization and slavery are using community gardens and other decolonial, community-centered practices to rewrite the story and bring the narrative of their city and land “back into the control of people who really choose to relate to it instead of extract from it.” Community gardens serve as crucial urban spaces that allow for the questioning, or rather decolonizing, of the hegemonic and colonial-based land commodification and food production/pathway systems that result in and thrive on, exploitation and food illiteracy.

The same volunteer points out the histories of violence that marginalized communities in Philadelphia have experienced and where community gardens fit into this history. Through mentioning pressing issues of poverty, gentrification, houselessness, displacement, environmental injustice, crime, and gun violence, he points out how urban gardens have come to exist as urban residents recognize the ways colonial governing systems have failed them. Largely due to the urban renewal initiatives in Philadelphia happening around the same time as the civil rights movement, many neighborhoods were ignored to increase the focus on Philadelphia's central downtown district (Goode and Schneider, 1994). This volunteer says,

Instead of community gardening and urban farming being acts of political resistance, it's almost like moving outside of the political system entirely and choosing autonomy and self-determination as a way forward. It goes hand in hand with political resistance, but it's a choice to build our own future in line with the values that we all believe in, as opposed to kind of begging a larger dominating structure for resources and attention that have never really been given to us.

Furthering this decolonial framework, most community gardens operate outside of traditional hierarchical structures and allow every committed volunteer and gardener a say over how the land is used. Recognizing this, thinking of community gardens as a shared "commons" is a useful lens to understand the social influence these gardens have. Agyeman and Boone (2022) describe the term "commons" as a space (physically and conceptually) where sharing resources collectively is equally in the interest of each individual. As most community gardens in Philadelphia are organized by marginalized, often black, communities, Agyeman and Boone's concept of "The Black Commons" extends to the realm of Philadelphia's community gardens. They explore early definitions and understandings of The Black Commons and point out Roane's theory that the idea was created from the Black community's collaborative ability to sustain "Black cultural, material, and spiritual needs in the midst of the horrors of slavery." Part of Roane's theory comes from the creation of yam grounds for the survival of enslaved Africans.



The authors write, “The grounds were subsistence agricultural plots created by enslaved African people within plantations as places where information, traditions, and other spiritual and material resources were shared.” This example of the early development of The Black Commons shows how rooted the cultivation of plants and food is in The Black Commons and how it has survived and persisted through years of oppression and white supremacist policies. Cumbers et al. in their Glasgow study, a predominantly white city, similarly call community gardens an “urban commons” where “production and work are based on social need, management strategies are democratic and collaborative, and values of collective knowledge formation and sharing are being cultivated.”

Thinking of Philadelphia’s community gardens as a black commons or urban commons, one volunteer illuminates the collective and shared responsibility community members have for the sustainability and operation of the spaces:

I saw the same people every month and I formed a relationship with them and that community. I had kind of a say in what we would do with the growing space. So there were some feelings of ownership and responsibility over the space. I think when you have the ability to make decisions to change a space like that it makes you care more about it. So that was really nice. But things moved slower because there were a lot of people that had opinions, right?

Feelings of collective responsibility, rather than hierarchical ownership—where everyone working has a mostly equal say in how the space is used and organized—creates an environment where everyone is invested in the sustainability and outcomes of the garden. One volunteer involved with community garden land protection through non-profits in south Philadelphia explains how some gardens in the area are home to over ten linguistic groups and shows how “the gardens allow people to grow food from their home countries and gives them control over food and plants they want to grow.” For gardens in Philadelphia, specifically south Philadelphia where they are largely sustained by various immigrant communities, cultures intertwine uniquely

through the growth and production of food. If a resident in the area wishes to grow a vegetable from their home country of Nepal, Bangladesh, Taiwan, etc. one has the ability to use the space how they want to, at the same time working alongside others growing foods from their respective countries. This allows for the sharing of foods from various regions of the world that one may not be introduced to in contexts outside of the garden. In this sense, the collective responsibility to the land that gardeners have in these urban spaces allows for important cross-cultural interactions through plants and food, despite language barriers and differences.

## **Poverty and Productivity**

One of the most common statements made by community garden volunteers in Philadelphia is that, as they currently exist, urban gardens are *not* an answer to the high levels of food insecurity many of the city's poorest residents experience. Simply put, community gardens do not serve as a large-scale contribution to the elimination of poverty. However, the spatial effect community gardens have on the neighborhoods they exist in positively serves the community in various different ways. One volunteer in West Philadelphia, with many years of experience working on different urban and rural farms across the United States, explains:

Our [community gardens] across Philadelphia are not the most productive spaces, but they're more like learning spaces. Understanding and knowing and seeing and working with the plants, seeing the relationship one can form with them is special. And I think, yes, our [gardens] definitely offer this deep connection with plants. Obviously having a beautiful garden is really valuable but like, you're working with the plants and orchards. You appreciate it more. (Volunteer, West Philadelphia)

This volunteer's explanation for a lack of "productivity" emphasizes the importance of other qualities inherent to community gardens. Often in the fast-paced and capital-influenced urban world, value is determined through efficiency and productivity. Through this lens, food must be produced cheaply and efficiently, regardless of the harmful chemicals or pesticides used to produce our world's agriculture. Additionally, this efficient method requires transportation

sometimes across the world and across national boundaries which contributes gravely to high carbon emissions. In fact, globally, the agriculture industry contributes to 18% of all greenhouse gas emissions released across the world, primarily from carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) emissions (Ozlu et al., 2022). Across the community gardens sphere in Philadelphia, residents and volunteers have become highly aware of these facts. The purpose of these gardens is ultimately to create value from their shared spaces in ways outside of the traditional realm. The food production aspect of these gardens, of course, has value itself, but the act of working with plants and understanding the processes and life cycles of plants and vegetables is a valuable and unique experience for many urban residents. Ultimately, a re-connection with plants, dirt, the natural world, and the community is prioritized far beyond general ideas of productivity.

## **Urban-Rural Gap and Slowness**

Reconnecting with nature in this urbanizing world similarly poses a challenge as cities continue to expand and the urban and rural gap continues to widen. Many nature-seeking urban residents are left longing to engage with nature and the outdoors, and this collective desire allows for the production and sustainability of many urban gardens. The following quote demonstrates how these gardens in Philadelphia are reconnecting the urban and natural worlds:

I think these community gardens are bringing people closer to nature and just understanding the life cycles of plants and all the beauty that comes from plants. I mean, there's a lot of people everywhere, especially in the city that have grown up in urban areas or even suburban areas I would say that aren't really connected to their food or know where it comes from. (Volunteer, West Philadelphia)

This demonstrates, not only the determination to connect with nature in the urban world but also the common disconnect between residents' food and its origin. In urban environments, the lack of food literacy and understanding of food production leads to high levels of waste and a lack of nutritional awareness (Satterthwaite et al., 2010). Understanding where food comes from, the

conditions necessary for the plants to thrive, and the entire process of food cultivation seems to have positive effects beyond a nutritional perspective. In a study on community gardens in Glasgow, Cumbers et al. write, “The role played by the gardens in introducing people from the local neighbourhood to food growing as well as health and well-being skills, such as cooking and preparing fresh fruit and vegetables, should not be understated” (Cumbers et al., 2018). One volunteer also highlights the benefits that come from the slowness of a garden, particularly in relation to the fast-paced neoliberal urban environment of Philadelphia:

It takes years and years and years for a tree to produce fruit. So for me at least, something that I've learned from that experience that has applied to other aspects of my life is patience and being okay with a slower pace—not expecting direct results. That's like the complete opposite of the world we live in today, where it's like instant gratification. You get what you want. (Volunteer, West Philadelphia)

This highlights a key desire of many urban gardens across Philadelphia. A space for life to slow down amidst the fast-paced culture of one of the United States’ largest post-industrial cities.

Christa Müller writes how the slowness of urban gardens and growing one’s own food shows “a shift in the symbolism and status of post-materialistic values and lifestyles. Do-it-yourself and grow-it-yourself also means finding one’s own expression in the products of one’s labor. It means setting oneself apart from a life of consuming objects of industrial production” (2014). In recent years, not just in Philadelphia, but in urban centers across the world, people have demonstrated an interest in reshaping the narratives around consumerism, particularly in terms of food and blurring the seemingly rigid binary between producer and consumer through the cultivation and consumption of their own plants, fruits, and vegetables. This self and communal reliance of food production found among community gardens allows primarily marginalized community members and neighborhoods to provide for themselves in ways outside of the food system rooted in a rich history of racism and oppression.

# Conclusion

Community gardens are vital spaces for Philadelphia’s urban landscape. Once I realized during my research how unique and important these spaces are for many neighborhood residents and dynamics across the area, I had to shift my focus away from green space and towards gardens more specifically. Considering the challenges most gardens in the city have faced as a result of urban development agendas, the people that continue to steward their reclaimed land are a major testament to the resiliency of individuals and communities that urban developers have no interest in helping or protecting. As spaces that are largely operated and sustained through volunteer labor, these gardens’ existence and persistence is attributed solely to the communal desire to care for the spaces along with the recognition of the necessity these spaces have for their neighborhoods. As Cumbers et al. write, “such collective and self-managed forms of work have given a sense of autonomy and control over the labour process that contrasts with the common experience of various forms of hierarchically organized and tightly supervised forms of employment( Cumbers et al., 2018). Community gardens are a glimpse into the possibilities of systems and structures based out of reciprocity and inherent responsibility that allow communities to flourish and sustain themselves. As the volunteer from Iglesias Garden says,

We just want our land. Let's stop putting barriers in place. And this is a demand directed at the city, even because again, it's like the city has so much power here. Treat us like a permanent, long term, necessary, and valuable use of land in the city and give us our protection and land security we deserve.

Demonstrated in chapter 1, we see glimpses of city recognition towards these urban gardens through the park’s department urban agriculture plan created in collaboration with the broad community of Philadelphia’s urban gardeners. For all of the volunteers and community members I interviewed, this plan alone is not enough. Firstly, the city must act and make decisions based on the plan that works to protect and expand urban gardening in Philadelphia.

Every urban gardener in Philadelphia understands the benefits that come from these shared spaces. Whether it be primarily for food production, a space to interact with plants, or reclaim stolen land, the existence of these gardens, no matter how large or small, if they occupy a small corner lot enough for only a couple beds, or a large parcel for community gatherings and events, the necessity of these spaces do not go unnoticed. One volunteer from West Philadelphia says, “I think most people would agree that even people that aren't nature people would probably rather have a garden space than an empty apartment building that's overpriced.” How can gardens get the city to recognize this? How can the rest of the community show their support for these gardens in truly productive ways? Progress is being made for gardeners in the city, but much more must be done for gardeners to feel that their spaces are legally and socially supported by the city.

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