



The Productivity of Produce: A study of the effectiveness of benefits provided by community gardens



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Abstract:

Community gardens have been used for years as a way for low-income communities around the United States and the world to receive fresh, organic produce without grocery store or farmer's market prices. However, this is not the only benefit a community garden can provide. Other benefits include increased physical, mental and social health, higher economic status, increased sustainability of communities, and a sense of shared culture and community cohesion. I delve into two differing case studies, the Central Minnesota Sustainability Project in St. Cloud, MN, and the Seeds of Success gardening program in Duluth, MN to evaluate how well they are able to provide the potential benefits of a community garden. I conclude that in order for a community garden to be deemed successful, they must provide all potential benefits and counteract any barriers to said benefits. These barriers can include lack of recognized education or skills, the effect of grocery stores on the local food market, transportation to and from gardening sites, and interference of the established community. Further implications for my research include the ability of new or existing community gardens to recognize possible barriers that may be hindering their ability to provide benefits to their communities.



Table 1: This table shows the effectiveness of both the central Minnesota Sustainability Project and the Seeds of Success community gardens at providing the potential benefits of community gardens. An x denotes an effective benefit and a ? denotes an area that they are not effectively providing a benefit.

Potential Community Garden Benefits	Central Minnesota Sustainability Project	Seeds of Success
Increased Health (Physical, Mental and Social)	X	?
Educational Opportunities	X	X
Economic Status/ Urban Investment (Social Capital)	X	X
Increased Sustainability	X	X
Sharing of Culture/ Community Cohesion	?	X

Conclusion:

Community gardens, though not always documented, have the ability to provide a number of benefits for low-income or immigrant communities. These benefits include: increased health, educational opportunities, increased economic status and urban investment, the sharing of cultures, and community cohesion. Both the Central Minnesota Sustainability Project (CMSP) and the Seeds of Success community gardening programs work very hard to benefit their respective communities, but when evaluated in terms of ideal outcomes, there are some areas in need of improvement. As Autumn Brown, director of the CMSP said,

“we invisibilize communities that don't fit within the way we've been socialized to think about what that ideal white culture looks like, and the African immigrants don't fit into that picture. They dress differently, they smell differently, they eat different foods. They are in every way different from that white cultural ideal. There is a profound dissonance there and it results from people saying “we don't want to see it, we don't want to think about it, because if we have to think about it, it means we have to think about the fact that the rest of the world is really different from us” and if you have to think about that, then you have to accept it. There is a lot of resistance within this community as to really seeing African immigrants as human.”

The Central Minnesota Sustainability Project must develop cultural awareness in the greater St. Cloud community and foster an environment for the immigrant and entrenched community to work together for a shared goal. This is a vital part of creating an inclusive and diverse community. Through plans for the creation of a global market, CMSP has attempted to combat community dissent and disinterest, but definitive plans have not yet been made. Alternatively, Seeds of Success must focus on encouraging participation in the gardening process. In many cases, low-income communities have a higher percentage of people who are overweight, out of shape, and generally unhappy. All of which can potentially be overcome with the health benefits community gardens provide. Seeds of Success currently have 12 production gardens throughout the Duluth area, but in an interview with the outreach coordinator Sarah Lee, I was told that the majority of the produce is sold to the community. Meaning gardeners are not able to produce their own fruits and vegetables. In order for community gardens to be truly successful, they must not only consider all potential benefits a community garden can provide, but also acknowledge the barriers that may be hindering them from reaching their true potential.

Images: Gardener Halima, www.sustainmn.org/give; CMSP logo, www.sustainmn.org; Seeds of Success logo, http://www.communityactionduluth.org/program_seeds.html

Methods:

I conducted a literature review regarding the definition, history, possible benefits of community gardens, and potential barriers for their implementation. In order to decide what potential benefits were possible for a community garden project in Minnesota, I analyzed a variety of community programs from around the U.S. and the world. I then evaluated the Central Minnesota Sustainability Project and the Seeds of Success community garden programs to ascertain how effective they are in their ability to provide potential benefits to their constituents. This was accomplished through a variety of interviews by phone and email with the directors of each organization as well as with Sarah Lee, the Seeds of Success outreach coordinator. After researching and conducting my interviews, I analyzed the information to determine future opportunities for community gardens to assist low-income and immigrant communities in Minnesota.

