

1-1-2013

## Gardening as Ethnographic Research: Volunteering as a Means for Community Access

Andrew Flachs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea>

---

### Recommended Citation

Flachs, Andrew. "Gardening as Ethnographic Research: Volunteering as a Means for Community Access." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2013): 97-103.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol16/iss1/8>

This Field Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Ecological Anthropology by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

FIELD NOTES

## Gardening as Ethnographic Research: Volunteering as a Means for Community Access



ANDREW FLACHS

### ABSTRACT

*This paper shows the ways that ethnographers can develop a more effective qualitative understanding of community gardens by volunteering as gardeners. It explains how volunteering helps gain access to different facets of the garden community. Ultimately, it shows that volunteering can provide an anthropological perspective on the idea, prevalent in the literature, that many people join community gardens only for the economic benefits.*

### INTRODUCTION

A growing body of anthropological research (Guthman 2008; O'Neal 2009; Von Hassell 2002) suggests that community gardening most often takes two forms. On one side are poorer immigrants and people of color who garden to save money and feel largely indifferent to the environmental impact of their actions. On the other side are rich white environmentalists who garden to align themselves with a utopian vision of an eco-friendly future and are unconcerned with the potential economic benefits of their work. While this may be true in some community gardens, volunteer ethnography in Cleveland's urban gardens shows that motivations are far more complex. Rather, their gardening expressed a more personal environmentalism related

directly to watching their plants grow and escaping the smell of Cleveland traffic to sit in the field and watch robins hunt crickets.

Following a snowball sampling method, I contacted a local garden coordinator, explained my project, and asked for the names of people who would be willing to show me their work. This led me to the community garden and community supported agriculture. Many community gardens and food access programs also have regular workdays in which they ask for volunteer labor, a perfect opportunity to meet garden gatekeepers. I found additional contacts in Cleveland by explaining my research to local permaculture groups and offering my time in exchange for their

interviews. These groups helped me network with their friends at community gardens, or at community supported agriculture (CSA) sites where customers buy shares in a local farm that delivers fresh produce weekly. Over the course of eight weeks in 2009, I volunteered at a public community garden, a garden run by a homeless shelter, a suburban farm, and a community supported agriculture site in the greater Cleveland area to investigate the conflicts between environmentalism and practical food growing. Each of these sites featured a unique demographic composition with respect to age, race, and income level, but in no way was any site homogeneous. The suburban farm housed both well-educated students supported by Oberlin College and older people from disparate income levels seeking to learn more about food production for personal gain. The public garden supported older, poorer, minority and white gardeners on social security side by side with younger, wealthier Cleveland professionals. The homeless shelter supported mainly Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic low-income gardeners. Finally, the community supported agriculture farm serviced a primarily Caucasian and Hispanic clientele. In this paper, I promote volunteering as a way to connect with urban gardeners and give them a chance to reflect on their use of garden space.

### **UNCOVERING BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY GARDENING: ENVIRONMENTALISM, HEALTH, AND MONEY**

As a volunteer in three Cleveland urban gardens and one community supported agriculture site in 2009 (Flachs 2010), I found a remarkable diversity of people spanning age, socioeconomic, racial, religious, and national boundaries. Because of the large return of as much as 2000 percent from relatively small investments (Patel 1991), gardening can make sense for people across socioeconomic lines. When I asked these people why they gardened in the middle of a

city, they answered that it helps them save money. This is true regardless of their socioeconomic demographic. However, this did not seem to be the whole story as it barely addressed any of the more distinctly cultural connections to gardening. Deeper in the conversation, they expounded on the wonderful community, the sense of fresh air, and they say that they love the sense of purpose they get from planting a seed and nurturing it until it becomes their dinner. With one informant, I helped an elementary class weed a garden bed and found that the gardening effectively provided supervision and instruction. Not only were the children excited to grow food, I heard one exclaim, "Oh cool, look at the broccoli"—an accomplishment in itself. As he carefully pruned his tomatoes, one man gently touched each plant, explaining, "They know me." Cost provides an initial push and/or one reason to continue gardening for many gardeners, but they build a community and benefit from its success for several other reasons.

Through farming and gardening, people become more invested in many of their food choices (Kenner 2008; Pollan 2002, 2006; Winne 2008) and are more likely to choose fresh and healthy food over "fast" and non-nutritious food (Armstrong 2000; Bellows et al. 2003). I made a point of inquiring about this kind of food politics with the Cleveland gardeners as a way of investigating the links between their gardening and larger issues of food access and environmentalism. Grateful for my help shoveling, one gardener insisted on making me lunch on several occasions. While eating, she told me that her recent switch to vegetarianism was directly related to her more personal engagement with her nourishment. She saw the work that went into her own food, and she decided that she only wanted food that had been cared for similarly. Volunteering helps create such opportunities for dialogue because the researcher-subject relationship becomes two-sided. With a community that so values personal input, every extra shovel or picked weed is noticed and appreciated.

## VOLUNTEERING AS ETHNOGRAPHY

Through ethnography, researchers can find that gardens are far more complicated intersections of socioeconomic diversity. Because it both demonstrates the anthropologist's commitment to the community and provides more time for qualitative research, volunteering as a gardener can be an extremely useful tool to investigate the ways that community gardens are used.

However, beyond volunteering, how do you shift the conversation to the politics and economics of gardening? Volunteers can gain access relatively easily by making contact with the community, offering their services, and accepting gardening criticism directed at their own plots cheerfully. As the summer progressed, my reputation as a volunteer preceded my personal introductions and put people at ease when I approached them. Important gatekeepers include the garden managers or volunteer managers, if the garden has such a position, who can give access to other informants. However, an earnest researcher willing to spread mulch will encounter few difficulties. Attitude is important here too, because the volunteer must not present their efforts as condescension but as a genuine desire to help and speak with the community. I found myself in an especially privileged position as an interviewer because many of the community members were immigrants, elderly people, and zealous farmers—a community especially predisposed to sharing their thoughts with a young researcher.

## DISCUSSING AESTHETICS, POLITICS, AND ECONOMICS IN THE GARDEN

Using a semi-structured interview schedule, I aimed to cover key research topics including environmentalism and economics, but I worked to remain flexible enough to discuss topics that arose as more salient in the minds of the gardeners. I found that the formal nature of a seated and recorded interview lent itself well to discussing garden demographics and the economics of urban gardening. Neither of these

topics, both of which served an important role in my research question, was easier to conceptualize when physically in the garden. However, questions of the aesthetic benefits of taste or sunshine are better asked in the moment. Although I began formal interviews by asking simply, "why do you garden?" the conversation often shifted to the qualitative intangibles of working outdoors and to the gratification of watching plants grow. To gauge their interest in political environmentalism generally, I asked about their membership in various environmental groups, their opinions on conservation and climate change, and about their political inclinations. Rather than begin with such questions, I found them easier to ask once I had picked up a shovel because they flowed more naturally from a conversation about an alternative lifestyle. I also used a straw man argument that lessened the pressure on my informants to agree with me or others, saying: "some people feel that gardeners are politically minded environmentalists. Is this true?" By speaking about the opinions of vague others, my informants could more freely agree or disagree than if I had asked them to explain their position to me.

Using my interviews as one step in an iterative process, it was helpful to build on the intangibles of garden aesthetics in the moment. My most common open-ended leads, "how does this food compare to food from the store" and "how is today's work going," encouraged the gardeners to reflect on their work and provided new lines of questioning. Although my semi-structured interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour, the conversations that took place crouched in front of vegetable beds proved far more fruitful. The sensory stimuli of the garden prompted countless observations on "the environment" or "good food" that would not arise in the quiet, indoor settings that are ideal for recording. From a strict methodological perspective, I found that these shared moments are the best opportunities to seek off-the-cuff interviews because they reveal the non-economic reasons for gardening—some of which include being outside, being around people, and interacting with children.

One difficulty with this method lies in the divided attention of the people I talked with. Groups watching school children were responsible for their safety, gardeners wanted to focus on their vegetables, and busy people who gardened in spare moments did not want to sit for interviews. This problem was most pronounced in the Community Supported Agriculture farm and the Cleveland community garden where people were more likely to be passing through. Interviews had to be cut short to accommodate schedules and the infrequent visitors were difficult to find when I wanted to ask follow-up questions. My interactions were likely to last no more than ten or twenty minutes so I had to focus my questions and decrease my volunteering. As a result, I helped these people less and they answered fewer questions for me. For longer, half-hour to hour semi-structured interviews I had to rely on organizers and elderly gardeners who formed a more dependable key group but who gave me a more positively or rose-colored view of the garden's inner workings and its place in the community. I approached other gardeners when possible to diversify my information but a full census was not possible owing to the time constraints of both myself and the gardeners.

This problem was less pronounced in the suburban and homeless shelter gardens, where people were more likely to have time and an active interest in talking with me about their lives. The gardening groups were much smaller and so I was able to talk with most of the people regularly involved in the garden's function, providing a more general view of the garden's role in the community. Interviews tended to take a more conversational tone and sometimes lasted multiple hours. Almost all of the interviews at the suburban farm were conducted during weeding, which concentrated people and encouraged talking. Open-ended questions including "how does gardening change the way you eat," "what purpose does this farm serve in your life," and "what is the role of spaces like this in the community," easily spilled over from a morning weeding into lunch. In this way, I found it best to combine participant-observation with my interview schedule, asking questions over a long pe-

riod of time that allowed for greater flexibility. This could be, however, extremely time consuming. The homeless informants were similarly willing to speak for many hours about the difficult circumstances of their lives. When talking with these groups, we often veered into territory such as Eastern philosophy or the prison system, which was interesting but largely unrelated to my work. Because my time was limited, some of these discussions took place at the expense of meeting other gardeners who wanted to show me new projects and I realized that more focused interviews took place during garden activities than during shade breaks. This is because the demands of the moment constantly refer back to the act of gardening itself.

Believing it to be either an obvious part of their experience or inconsequential, several of my informants did not volunteer information about their political or environmental philosophies. When informants did not explicitly mention environmentalism, I asked "what is the effect of this open space on your life and on the community", and "how is the garden different from other spaces in the city" to investigate their perceptions of green space and learn what specific language they used to describe it. This was especially important to me as I wanted to test the resonance of liberal environmentalism in the urban gardens.

I addressed the economics question in two ways. First, I asked people about the amount of food they received from the gardens and the extent to which they were satisfied with their produce. In my project, I was satisfied with this qualitative self-description, even to the point of being more interested in gardeners' insistence that their vegetables were superior to those found in the store. This question was best answered by probing into ideas of nutrition and the value of home-grown food and involved multiple levels of probing to determine why each specific vegetable and fruit was better from the garden than from the store. More quantitatively, I priced the food collected at the CSA against comparable conventionally produced and, when possible, organic produce at a local grocery store.

As a young anthropologist, I quickly discovered that my interviews and less formal fieldwork progressed better when I picked up the shovel. Such off-the-cuff questions as, “why are you thinning this bed rather than a different bed?” or “is this the usual group of gardeners?” make sense in the moment and are easy to forget in front of the recording device. Not only does this interaction help build rapport, the tactile nature of gardening helps informants explain their motivations. Although I have some horticultural experience, downplaying this knowledge and working under the supervision of gardeners encouraged my informants to carefully explain their process and prevented me from making assumptions about their work.

### USING EXTENDED NETWORKS TO MEET NEW GARDENERS

Some other interactions took a more political, or if not so political then organizing, tilt since the social networking and flow of ideas served to connect and educate interested gardeners. A number of gardens in Cleveland, Ohio have received support from the Ohio State University Extension office. The homeless shelter’s garden not only received planning assistance from the Ohio State University Extension office, it was later featured in a promotional video (Smith 2009).

Having proved myself as a gardener through volunteer work, I found myself invited to food policy meetings, potlucks, and the networking website for “Local Food Cleveland,” which provided greater networking and fieldwork opportunities. More importantly, the experience widened my scope as I saw the increasing number of stakeholders on the local and national level. Because many community gardens require a dedicated group of organizers to stay functional, gardens tend to be hotbeds for grassroots organizers.

Along with the elderly gardeners, these enthusiastic organizers provided the bulk of my interview and

observation data. As I presented myself as a willing student, both of these groups enjoyed the opportunity to educate me on the practicality of gardening and on their politics. I did not meet any gardeners who were unfriendly to me, but I found that younger adults, especially those with children, were more preoccupied with their work and family and less interested or willing to stop and talk with me. Within the confines of my relatively small project, I chose to focus on the most talkative and best connected individuals, appreciating that these gardeners would be likely to have positive opinions about their work. However, given that the gardening was voluntary, I also recognized that none of the gardeners actively disliked their work or the sites. I found that the homeless gardeners generally enjoyed the opportunity to talk with an interested researcher but, owing to the transient nature of the shelter, I lost contact with several initial informants. Although others stayed for the duration of the summer, my research suffered from this uncertainty and inability to follow up on fieldwork.

Gardens expose urban citizens to a natural environment, surrounding them with green rather than urban blight. Despite their distinction from the greater environmental movement, many small community and urban gardens share its ideological tenets. Because gardens are focal points for some environmental issues and because they sometimes reach a wide demographic spread, savvy volunteers can easily find themselves conscripted into impassioned discussions, thus providing further opportunities for research in the social impact of urban greenspace or alternative community organizing. At some meetings, my role of researcher occasionally forced me into a more public role as local food groups asked me to speak for the gardens. Although I declined because I was not comfortable representing the gardens, I did make my research available to the food policy and environmental groups that requested it.

Numerous researchers (Patel 1991; Von Hassell 2002; Winne 2008) have observed that gardens can be conduits for information and social networking. First, gardeners tend to enjoy sharing trade secrets

and instructing less experienced members of the community. The gardeners at the homeless shelter especially valued this sense of ownership and earned respect. Additionally, all three of the gardens in which I worked used art, potlucks, and barbeques to allow community members to showcase their creativity and individuality while reinforcing the communal nature of their actions. These are activities a volunteer can go to, as well, to experience another social side of community gardening that provides motivation and cohesion.

To investigate the ways that gardeners use these spaces, researchers need to look beyond quantifiable sources such as money saved, pounds produced, or property values. When working with a community that is so based on physical labor, such as gardeners, offering your time and energy can be a welcome means of gaining easy access to the group. By volunteering, ethnographers can get an authentic sense of the use and meaning that gardeners attach to community gardens.

---

**Andrew Flachs**, *Department of Anthropology, Washington University*, aflachs@go.wustl.edu

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would have been impossible without the help of: Oberlin College Office of Undergraduate Research, Baron Pineda, The Kentucky Garden, 2100 Lakeside Men's Shelter, The George Jones Memorial Farm, and The Oberlin Zion Community Development Corporation. Two anonymous referees provided very useful comments on the manuscript.

## REFERENCES CITED

- ARMSTRONG, D.  
2000 A survey of community gardens in upstate New York: Implications for health promotion and community development. *Health and Place* 6:319-327.
- BELLOWS, A.C., K. BROWN, AND J. SMIT.  
2003 *Health benefits of urban agriculture*. Paper made available by the members of the Community Food Security Coalition's North American Initiative on Urban Agriculture. Retrieved July 13, 2012, from <http://www.foodsecurity.org/UAHealthArticle.pdf>.
- FLACHS, A.  
2010 Food for thought: The social impact of community gardens in the greater Cleveland area. *Electronic Green Journal* 30(1). Retrieved July 15, 2012, from <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bh7j4z4>
- GUTHMAN, J.  
2008 Bringing good food to others: Investigating the subjects of alternative food practice. *Cultural Geographies* 15:431-447.
- KENNER, R., DIR.  
2008 *Food Inc.* 93 min. New York: Magnolia Pictures.

- O'NEAL, J.  
2009 "Back to the future: Saving the world one (garden) plot at a time."  
Paper presented at the Central States Anthropological Society.  
Champagne-Urbana, Illinois.
- PATEL, I.C.  
1991 Gardening's socioeconomic impacts.  
*Journal of Extension* 29(4):7-8.
- POLLAN, M.  
2002 *The botany of desire*.  
New York: Random House.
- POLLAN, M.  
2006 *The omnivore's dilemma*.  
New York: The Penguin Press.
- SMITH, B., DIR.  
2009 *From Cleveland Rocks to Cleveland Grows*.  
8:41 min. Cleveland, OH: OSU  
Extension Cuyahoga County –  
Horticulture.
- VON HASSELL, M.  
2002 *The struggle for Eden: Community gardens in New York City*.  
Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- WINNE, M.  
2008 *Closing the food gap*.  
Boston: Beacon Press.