Urban agriculture and ecological citizenship in Philadelphia
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Green political theory has discovered urban areas as important spaces for the cultivation of ecological citizenship. Here, we explore urban agriculture’s contribution to ecological citizenship, a concept that emphasises opportunities for public participation in, and social learning about, environmental decisions. Our analysis is based on participant-observation and open-ended interviews with the leaders and community participants of seven urban agricultural organisations in Philadelphia. Following a brief discussion of urban ecological citizenship and our study design, we discuss how urban agriculture promotes participation and learning.

Keywords: urban agriculture; ecological citizenship; inclusion; participation; social and democratic learning

Urban ecological citizenship
Environmentalists have long ignored the urban environment. We argue cities are worthy of more attention from environmentalists not only as a matter of distributive justice, but also because cities are potential spaces for ecological citizenship. Here, we are guided by Light’s (2003, p. 57) model of urban ecological citizenship, construed as “the fulfillment of ecological aims in a city concerned with both caring for ecosystems and building better civic communities”. Light’s (2003, p. 51) model is grounded in the classical republican notion of citizenship, in which citizenship is “a virtue met by active participation at some level of public affairs”. As Light (2003, p. 55) explains, “Urban citizenship must be grounded in institutions and practices across scales, including smaller scales at the level of the local public”. Here, we explore urban farming activities in Philadelphia as sites for developing urban ecological citizenship. Following a brief discussion of urban ecological citizenship and our study design, we examine seven Philadelphia urban agriculture organisations in terms of two components of ecological citizenship: opportunities for (1) public participation in and (2) social learning about food production and consumption practices and decisions.

Study design
Urban agriculture, we believe, offers fertile soil in which to conjoin environmentalism to urban citizenship. The conventional agrifood system has become increasingly concentrated and centralised, leaving little room for public participation in its decision-making processes.
Urban governance today also tends to offer little space for city residents to be involved in their agrifood and land systems for reasons including historical trends that have defined food as a rural issue; urban land-use economics that leaves little room for food production in cities; and the failure of municipalities to sufficiently include the public in decision-making processes.

We emphasise the potential of direct participation of city residents managing their urban environments. Light (2003, p. 58) suggests “the first goal of the development of an urban ecological citizenship involves the stimulation of public participation in the maintenance of natural processes in cities”. Participation is crucial, Light (2002, p. 157) argues, because a “direct participatory relationship between local human communities and the nature they inhabit or are adjacent to is at least a necessary condition for encouraging people to protect natural systems and landscapes around them”. Hence, we explore hands-on participation involving residents actually getting their hands dirty.

Philadelphia, sometimes referred to as “the grande dame of urban community gardens” (Hassall 2002, p. 42), is currently home to 226 “food-producing community and squatter gardens” (Vitiello and Nairn 2009, p. 3). Seven are included in our analysis. In the Kensington neighbourhood, Greensgrow Farms, a hybrid for-profit business and non-profit organisation, operates on a former three-fourths-acre industrial site (Corboy 2002). In Germantown, Weaver’s Way Co-op (2006) Farm began on a half acre, “designed to meet the needs of the Co-op produce department”, and recently tripled in size, expanding its market base and educational programmes. In the Mill Creek Neighborhood, Mill Creek Farm serves as an ecological educational centre, committed to improving local access to nutritious food (J. Walker and J. Rosen, personal communication, 2 May 2008). In Northeast Philadelphia, Somerton Tanks Farm (STF) was run as a temporary demonstration of an economically viable sub-acre farming model (STF and IILF 2006). The Philadelphia Orchard Project (n.d.) was established to help existing neighbourhood groups plant and maintain their own fruit and berry orchards. The University City High School hosts a garden run by the Urban Nutrition Initiative, which educates and employs high school students in after-school and summer jobs growing and selling produce (D. Harris, personal communication, 5 May 2008). Urban Tree Connection (UTC n.d.) is a non-profit that promotes community and youth development through the greening of urban open space on numerous sites in West and North Philadelphia.

Multiple site visits and open-ended interviews with farmers and gardeners associated with each of these projects were conducted in 2008 and 2009, with a view to understanding how these projects afford city residents opportunities for learning and making decisions about food production and consumption. Following an interpretive approach to social inquiry and engaging urban agriculture primarily as political theorists we seek to better “understand” rather than “explain” urban agriculture’s contribution to ecological citizenship – that is, we are interested in exploring the meaning of urban agriculture with regard to ecological citizenship rather than seeking to discover causal connections (Schwartz-Shea 2006, Yanow 2006).

Urban agriculture and ecological citizenship: inclusion and learning

Inclusion

Inclusion – “getting marginalized players into the agrifood system” (Stevenson et al. 2007, p. 40) – motivates many scholars and activists of the US alternative agrifood movement (Allen 2004). This concern is evident, for example, in the literature on civic agriculture
DeLind 2002, Lyson 2004), which starts from the insight that food differs from many other commodities in that we simply cannot live without it. Inclusion in urban agriculture in particular is achieved through its bottom-up and multi-actor approach to decision-making, in contrast to the concentrated top-down control of agribusiness (Lang 1999). It is no coincidence that urban agriculture is often lauded for its inclusion of women, ethnic minorities, the elderly, and other disadvantaged populations (Smit and Bailkey 2006).

The city farming activities in Philadelphia exemplify the value of inclusive decision-making on several levels. For most of the groups studied, community members play a large role in deciding what food is grown. In some of the projects, participants contribute to management decisions, deciding how food should be grown and distributed, for example. Mill Creek, Weaver’s Way, UC High School Garden, Greensgrow, UTC, and Philadelphia Orchard Project base the decision of what to grow on what makes sense regarding season, location, and market factors (to varying degrees), but rely heavily on the community members’ preferences.

UTC measures its success by the degree to which the community participates in identifying, planning, and supporting public green spaces. It builds gardens through dialogue with residents so that the community decides where and how spaces should be developed, recognising that it is necessary to be “flexible with local neighborhood leaders to allow them to devise strategies that best fit their neighborhoods, needs and modes of operation” (RWJF 2004). Community members contribute a significant amount of volunteer time, assisting with children’s programmes, maintaining the gardens, and holding special events. One neighbour explains, “Community involvement is the main thing from start to finish, and the food produced is just an extra benefit” (J. Manuel, personal communication, 21 August 2009).

In addition to including community member preferences in the UC High School Garden’s growing practices, the voices of its high school student employees are incorporated into its management. According to the coordinator, the programme’s overall goals are youth development and empowerment. She tries to “really have the kids be involved with all the decisions so that they feel like this is a place they have investment in, a place they feel safe in, a place they have a voice in” (D. Harris, personal communication, 5 May 2008). The students, whether building and maintaining the farm structures, tending the garden, or teaching others healthy cooking, are given a lot of responsibility.

There are, however, at least two potential limitations to the generally inclusive nature of urban agriculture. First, some alternative agrifood projects can be narrowly focused on private interests and reliant on traditional market relations at the potential expense of social justice. Hinrichs and Barham (2007, p. 351) explain that the neoliberal context of the food system “in underscoring a certain primacy of the marketplace also subordinates other concerns and interests that include meaningful participation by diverse populations and benefits sharing with disadvantaged groups”. Some of the farms in Philadelphia illustrate this challenge of balancing the economic and social justice goals of the alternative agrifood movement. For example, even though community members expressed an interest in produce that could be sold at a lower price, Somerton Tanks Farm did not grow it because it did not meet the business’s goal of maximising profits (R. Christensen, personal communication, 13 May 2008).

Second, even when alternative agrifood organisations aim to work for social justice, they face the difficulty of informing decisions democratically. Allen (2004, p. 18) contends that this has not been adequately addressed by alternative agrifood organisations whose primary participants “closely resemble the participants in conventional agriculture in class, gender, and ethnicity”. Allen (2004) also notes that the structural inequalities of
the agrifood system cannot be solved simply by ensuring the inclusion of a diversity of actors and by working from a local level. Creating inclusive local agrifood systems does not automatically guarantee equal representation, as there are “clear asymmetries of power and privilege embedded within small communities” (Allen 2004, p. 172). For example, although women are better represented in alternative agrifood organisations than in conventional ones, gender inequality remains a problem because men still tend to hold leadership roles (Allen 2004). Although four of the seven urban agriculture groups studied are run by females, each of the seven organisations is led mostly by white, middle-class people. However, some of the groups, particularly the UC High School Garden, the UTC, Mill Creek Farm, and the Philly Orchard Project, work to include the marginalised populations of the community in the decisions that shape the organisation.

**Social learning**

We examine how urban agricultural activities promote learning not only about food and the environment but citizenship more generally. Urban agriculture has the potential to educate city residents in two ways. First, by learning about their food – where, how, and by whom it is grown – people may be able to make more informed decisions about their food system. Second, by participating in food growing groups, people can learn how to be effective citizens.

**Urban agriculture and environmental learning**

We examine the ways in which urban agriculture cultivates and values local knowledge – “knowledge pertaining to a local context or setting, including empirical knowledge of specific characteristics, circumstances, events, and relationships, as well as the normative understandings of their meaning” (Fischer 2000, p. 194). In this sense, we find that urban agricultural projects provide a forum for a wide range of discourses and a broad conceptualisation of knowledge to be explored and expressed.

**Participant education.** Most urban agricultural programmes give participants the chance to get their hands dirty and help with the daily activities involved in growing food. By teaching how food is produced, “the hope is that a new generation will grow up with a better understanding of the true value of food, and with the knowledge to make informed decisions about future food policy” (Iles 2005, p. 85). Furthermore, in learning how to grow food, both children and adults gain valuable practical skills in production, processing, and marketing that can be useful in seeking employment (Brown and Carter 2003, Howe et al. 2005, Smit and Bailkey 2006). Some city farms even run employment or internship programmes.

Many of the urban agricultural projects in Philadelphia incorporate participant education in one form or another. Like the other farms in Philadelphia, Mill Creek serves communities that are disconnected from their food sources. Both children and adults tend to not know where their food comes from – they “just think it comes from the grocery store” (J. Walker and J. Rosen, personal communication, 2 May 2008). The primary objective of Mill Creek, a self-proclaimed “education centre”, is to educate city residents about their food system (Mill Creek Farm 2007). School field trips, community group service projects, and volunteers visit the farm and assist in a variety of activities. During their first year, Mill Creek Farm employed high school students in a job skills training programme; in 2007 they had two college interns, and they hope to have both in the future (Mill Creek Farm 2007, J. Walker and J. Rosen, personal communication, 2 May 2008).
In addition to a profitable food production business, Weaver’s Way Farm runs an extensive education programme, bringing in hundreds of school children from surrounding communities and growing food at schools. Young participants gain farming experience in the Children’s Garden and are introduced to broad agrifood issues, including the impacts of globalisation. The farm also welcomes community service groups, students doing school projects, and volunteers of all ages (D. Siller, personal communication, 23 May 2008).

The primary aim of the UC High School Garden is youth development and education. The garden employs UC High School students, who receive instruction in a wide range of topics including food production, the conventional agrifood system, and nutrition (D. Harris, personal communication, 5 May 2008). The students also take on leadership roles educating the community. “A lot of people really need help knowing the right things to eat”, stresses one student (Henry 2009, p. 27). Students from other local schools and a variety of volunteers also participate in the gardening activities (D. Harris, personal communication, 5 May 2008).

The UTC runs programmes teaching children about many aspects of food production and consumption, including plant care, pest management, and nutrition (S. Wiener, personal communication, 1 July 2008). A group of youths, the “VeggieKids”, participates in a business programme in which they harvest, wash, package, and distribute the food throughout the neighbourhood. As the founder and executive director explains, “that harvest, that physical activity is very much a part of teaching the kids” (S. Wiener, personal communication, 1 July 2008).

Community members both recognise and try to expand upon the benefits of UTC’s children’s programmes. One neighbour of the Pearl Street and Conestoga Street Gardens gets emotional when she explains “with all sincerity” that the children are “growing in character” because of the children’s programmes (L. Barkley, personal communication, 30 July 2009). Two children in particular, she points out, have “earned a lot” — that is, they proved they were responsible enough to have their own lot of land on which they are successfully growing food on their own. Another neighbour describes the educational value of the VeggieKids programme – she explains that the children “get some money in their pockets, teaching them to be responsible” (A. Topping, personal communication, 6 August 2009).

Community members provide additional education opportunities for the neighbourhood children that go beyond UTC’s official after-school programmes. For example, the Pearl Conestoga Garden Association (PCGA), a group of neighbours interested in taking more responsibility in the gardens, holds an annual Harvest Party. During last year’s, they put on a parade with educational costumes and made recycling bins available to encourage community recycling (A. Topping, personal communication, 6 August 2009).

Adults involved in UTC gardens also learn a lot about gardening and cooking, some stressing that they did not know much before (A. Rice, personal communication, 20 August 2009). The PCGA organised workshops in which they received training from the Penn State Extension programme on topics including soil care and biological pest control. An UTC staff member observes that both children and adults have changed regarding what they will touch (e.g. bugs and dirt) and which foods they will eat. She explains that “they go through a process: first they will not eat something new to them, then they will try it, then they really like it and eat more of it” (H. Nelson, personal communication, 19 August 2009). When asked about the impact of the gardens, one community member explains that she “has a greater respect for farmers now that she sees what it takes”, now that “she sees through their eyes” (A. Topping, personal communication, 6 August 2009).
Community education. In addition to those directly involved, urban agricultural projects educate the community at large about agriculture and food. Deelstra and Girardet (2001) explain that members of a community in which food is being grown tend to have more interest in agrifood system processes, whether or not they participate in the growing themselves. Howe et al. (2005) suggest that sometimes just having access to locally grown foods educates the community and raises awareness of agrifood issues.

Mill Creek Farm (2007) is committed to educating the greater Philadelphia community and does so by offering community-skill share workshops, hosting volunteer “work days”, and distributing nutrition education materials to low-income populations in the city. The Philadelphia Orchard Project has developed a draft of an orchard care manual specific to the Philadelphia region that will be distributed to the community groups with which they plant orchards (D. Vitiello, personal communication, 20 May 2008).

Ferris et al. (2001, p. 566) describe demonstration gardens as “gardens devoted to public education”. Founded as a demonstration project, Somerton Tanks Farm (STF and IILF 2006) was not committed to public education in the same sense that farms like Mill Creek are. For example, the managers minimised the number of volunteers and educational activities because they were impeding the business imperatives of the farm (R. Christensen, personal communication, 13 May 2008). However, Somerton Tanks did educate the community in a number of indirect ways. For example, it provided the members of the community in which it was located a chance to witness a side of the agrifood system rarely experienced by many city residents. Furthermore, it demonstrated to the city’s government agencies that unused municipal land could be put to alternative and productive use (Urban Partners 2007). Because the Philadelphia Water Department recognised that it was important that people see what was happening on its property, tours continued to be conducted even after the other educational activities ceased (R. Christensen, personal communication, 13 May 2008).

Co-founder of Greensgrow Farms Mary Seton Corboy explains that the organisation’s mission is to demonstrate that a viable green business can operate on old industrial land. In this sense, Greensgrow teaches the community about the agrifood system and city government about alternative uses of urban land. Although Greensgrow Farms did not have an official education programme at the time of this study, it did offer tours – 350 were given in 2007, and Corboy proclaims that the community members know more about food than they did before Greensgrow was there (M. Seton Corboy, personal communication, 6 May 2008).

Neighbours of the UTC gardens in West Philadelphia work in the gardens daily. Other community members participate when there are volunteer days, or as one neighbour explains, as they see people in the garden working they get interested and join in (A. Rice, personal communication, 20 August 2009). He believes this is an important way for community members to teach each other. He also points out how more and more neighbours are starting to plant flowers and other vegetation around their homes “because they see the effort” of the gardens – “it’s catching on”.

Farmer education. City farms also educate and train active and potential farmers. In the wake of a national decline in the number of farmers as large-scale agribusinesses take over and traditional farmers get older, Hamm and Baron (1999, p. 56) point out that the “primary mechanism of increasing the farming population will be to grow more farmers”. Another way in which Somerton Tanks Farm served as a demonstration farm was through the educational opportunities it provided farmers. A number of interns learned the farming business, and some went on to become full-time farmers.
(R. Christensen, personal communication, 13 May 2008). The farm also served as an experimental station for a sub-acre growing method called SPIN Farming™ (Small Plot Intensive) (Satzewich and Christensen 2005–2007). Internship programmes have also been a part of Weaver’s Way and Mill Creek, offering budding farmers the chance to learn and practice small-scale food production (D. Siller, personal communication, 23 May 2008, J. Walker and J. Rosen, personal communication, 2 May 2008). Moreover, these Philadelphia farmers educate each other, communicating and sharing resources through an email list-serve called PUFN (Philadelphia Urban Farmers Network).

Urban agriculture and democratic learning

Beyond providing education about specific issues and topics, participation in environmental civic associations cultivates the political and social skills necessary for effective citizenship, which can have wider transformative effects beyond just growing food. Participatory rituals encourage citizens to “reproduce and reconstitute their social and political relationship with one another” (Forester 1999, p. 130). Light (2001) suggests restoration projects and community gardens as examples of such participatory activities that are important not only for their end result but also for connecting city residents to nature. He sees these projects as “a sort of schoolhouse for environmental responsibility and a means of stimulating more democratic environmental practices” (Light 2001, p. 30). Such transformative social learning rooted in social practices informs our thinking about how ecological citizenship evolves in urban agriculture (see also Winne 2008, pp. 189–190). As with learning the basics of the agrifood system, democratic learning occurs on individual and community levels.

Individual democratic learning. By struggling together to solve problems in alternative agrifood projects, individuals potentially gain strong civic virtues and enhance their democratic capacity, learning the rights and responsibilities associated with participating in a democracy (Feenstra 1997). Brown and Jameton (2000, p. 29) point out that developing and sustaining urban gardens are particularly effective in this manner because it “requires complicated knowledge and skills to navigate government offices, access public resources, persuade funders, and deal with complex social relationships”. Smit and Bailkey (2006) suggest that city farms specifically committed to community building enhance individuals’ self-confidence and encourage them to share and act on the knowledge they have gained. Levkoe (2006) highlights the personal transformation that occurs as an individual who once felt powerless realises she can use her new skills to make a difference.

The UC High School Garden students are good examples of this phenomenon. In addition to gaining farming and marketing skills and knowledge, they learn to work together to meet their goals. For example, in a meeting held in preparation for a fundraiser dinner, the students participated in every aspect of planning, from the clothes they would wear to the order in which the evening’s events would take place. They also participate in the annual, youth-focused and youth-led, Rooted in Community conference which provides a networking opportunity for young people who aim to improve community food systems. The Garden tries to maintain that youth-led model throughout the year, encouraging interaction and consensus (D. Harris, personal communication, 5 May 2008).

Community building. Community activities provide a social forum in which democratic learning thrives, and urban agricultural projects are often founded on community building principles (Levkoe 2006). As examples of community building, Allen (2004) points to the connections made between consumers and growers as well as the multigenerational and
multicultural connections that take place on urban farms. On city farms, diverse community actors interact to establish the objectives, design, and execution of the project, navigate government regulations, and obtain resources, ultimately gaining “a sense of shared accomplishment in how the methods and results of food production and distribution translate into something more encompassing” (Smit and Bailkey 2006, pp. 147–147). Iles (2005, p. 85) explains that such community activity helps develop a greater community confidence and skills base that leads to “the ability of a community to take an interest in and to shape its own future”.

Community building is regularly incorporated into Mill Creek’s activities. The farm partners with the adjacent community garden “to facilitate inter-generational exchange between school age groups and elders” (Mill Creek Farm 2007). It also hosts numerous “work days” during which community members partake in the farming process and learn about agrifood system issues (Mill Creek Farm 2007, J. Walker and J. Rosen, personal communication, 2 May 2008). At the farmers’ markets and farm stands through which Mill Creek, UC High School Garden, Greensgrow, Somerton Tanks, and Weaver’s Way sell their produce, community members interact with the farmers, thereby building community relationships.

One of UTC’s primary purposes is community development and community members are playing increasingly active roles (S. Wiener, personal communication, 1 July 2008). The organisation hopes to eventually have the community members themselves run the farming programmes. Four neighbours of two adjacent gardens have already formed the PCGA with the objective of promoting the gardens’ maintenance and growth. They help with the children’s programmes and are planning activities to engage more children and adults in the garden. Fifteen interested neighbours of another site have joined together as the Haddington Farm Advisory Board to plan a future garden.

Philadelphia Orchard Project’s Vitiello stresses that, in addition to food production, a primary aim of the initiative is to get community members to work together and thus to care about and be invested in the orchards. The Orchard Project, he explains, is about building community control of food production. He points out that it collaborates with city-wide organisations, such as the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, as well as a number of community-based groups, including schools, youth groups, faith-based organisations, and community gardens (D. Vitiello, personal communication, 20 May 2008, Moss-Coane 2008). Mary Seton Corboy likewise insists that the community is an integral part of the Greensgrow Farms model. She makes it a point to communicate with her neighbours and supports them in a variety of ways. In turn, they feel invested in and support her business (M. Seton Corboy, personal communication, 6 May 2008).

Conclusion

In the face of growing criticism of our concentrated and centralised agrifood system, urban agriculture groups like the ones surveyed here are effectively experimenting with more participatory democratic arrangements for our food and urban systems. Our analysis suggests that if cities wish to foster urban agricultural activity, they should do so in a way that protects and nurtures the gains for ecological citizenship achieved by some of the groups described above. The seven organisations studied here reveal that city farming provides residents with opportunities to participate in and learn about their food and urban systems, helping them act as food citizens, not just consumers. These urban agriculture projects teach participants, community members, and potential and active farmers about food, nutrition, and agricultural processes, informing their food-related decisions. Beyond
agricultural and environmental education, participation in these environmental civic associations cultivates the political and social skills necessary for effective citizenship, building community and transforming some residents into urban ecological citizens.

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References


