

Gardens in Faith-Based Settings Case Story Series

Cultivating Community

INTRODUCTION

Gardens positively impact physical, social, emotional, and mental health.(1-4) While gardening can be therapeutic for the individual gardener, gardening alongside others can contribute to the formation of social bonds and social cohesion.(2) Gardens align naturally with the goals of faith-based organizations that strive to be refuges of healing (or “sanctuary”) and seek to build supportive communities.



As part of the USDA-funded Champions for Change program,^a the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health partnered with 4 agencies to build gardens at more than 30 churches in low-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles County. Staff from the partner agencies worked with church members to build the gardens, trained church members on gardening skills, provided ongoing technical assistance to the church members managing the gardens, and assisted at times with day-to-day maintenance of the gardens. While the partner agencies were funded to build the garden infrastructure and provide classes, the churches often contributed

volunteer time and in-kind donations such as cash or supplies to support the gardens. The gardens, combined with nutrition education and cooking classes, were designed to reach church congregation members and local community residents to promote access to and consumption of healthy food.

This case story synthesizes information from multiple sources, including: a literature review, analysis of 2016 RE-AIM^b evaluation data from 29 gardens reported by the partner agencies, observational assessments conducted at one garden from each of the four partner

“The benefits of the garden, the transformation in these communities... It’s not just about food, it’s about creating safe spaces, building a community network, improving quality of life.”

~ Garden Expert

^a The USDA-funded Champions for Change program seeks to reach low-income individuals and families who may be eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. The four partner agencies engaged SNAP-Ed eligible individuals through volunteering in the gardens, learning to cook with fresh produce grown in the gardens, and consuming fruits and vegetables from the gardens. “SNAP-Ed” is the nutrition education and obesity prevention component of SNAP.

^b RE-AIM is an evaluation framework that stands for “Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation and Maintenance”.

agencies in Summer 2016,^c and 27 interviews with community garden experts, partner agency staff and gardeners from the congregations and local communities conducted in Summer 2016. While churches were the only type of faith-based organization that collaborated with the partner agencies to establish gardens, the case story findings and lessons learned may be applied to gardens in other types of faith-based organizations because they share common organizational structures and missions.

OPPORTUNITIES

Gardens in faith-based settings offer an opportunity to build community in neighborhoods that are divided by different cultures, languages, ages, and socioeconomic levels. The act of gardening is often a collective activity, and the garden itself can serve as a community gathering space that many people can enjoy, not just the gardeners. The following examples highlight potential benefits of gardens in faith-based settings.

Providing a space for social interaction between gardeners, congregation and community members

Gardens are a communal space, providing opportunities to engage in healthy behaviors such as physical activity and growing fruits and vegetables, as well as facilitating social interaction and connection with other gardeners. Studies have shown that gardening decreases social isolation, especially for seniors and immigrant or refugee populations.(1,2) In the words of one of the older adult gardeners interviewed for this case story, "Whenever you're retired you need to socialize with people. A lot of time there [in the garden] we have a lot of conversation."

Several interviewees discussed the important role gardens play in providing a safe neighborhood place for residents to convene, which contributes to creating a sense of place and identity.(2) One interviewee highlighted Koreatown in Los Angeles,

"People were working together... to see the young and the old together doing activities, and to see the exuberance over it was just really exciting."

~ Gardener

which has no open green space, "So the garden has become a place where people can come and sit and relax in the evenings...I often see some of the women hanging out and cleaning a little bit, playing with the kids." Other interviewees discussed the pride that comes from establishing and maintaining a shared garden space that is visible within the neighborhood. In the words of the director of an inter-faith church and community center, "It creates pride in a community...it begins with one person who plants the garden, waters the garden...and then others say, 'That's beautiful!...If you plant the seed, you're planting hope for tomorrow!'" Several of the gardens in faith-based settings in Los Angeles have incorporated design elements including sitting areas with shade cover, picnic tables, and play areas for children, that can be used as spaces where individuals come together. Three of the four gardens visited for the case story had rooms available in the church adjacent to the gardens that could be used for meetings and classes.^d The interviewees explained that many social and cultural events were hosted in the garden spaces at the churches, including: garden work days and garden launch events, music, staff meetings, "meet and greet" events, and prayer groups.

Amelioration of mental and emotional health issues

Gardening can ameliorate mental and emotional health issues like depression and anxiety.(1,3) Spending time outside in nature, surrounded by garden plants has significant physical and therapeutic benefits such as decreased blood pressure and increased self-esteem.(3,5) In the words of one gardener interviewed for the case story, "It kind of connects you with nature and I think

^c A total of four gardens were observed; the four partner agencies each chose one exemplary garden for observation by Ad Lucem Consulting.

^d Observational assessments and interviews completed by Ad Lucem Consulting in Summer 2016.

that's [a need] in all of us...It just refreshes us. And the color green is restful to your eyes! So maybe not only does it rest you but it does something inside your soul." One Los Angeles garden project highlighted by an interviewee had an explicit focus on healing and was integrated into an addiction rehabilitation program at a faith-based housing and rehabilitation center; every day individuals in the rehabilitation program were invited to spend time in the garden, watering and tending to the plants.

Changing norms regarding gardening, healthy lifestyles and caring for the earth

Gardens in faith-based settings contribute to changing cultural norms about healthy eating in the congregation and community.(1,6-8) Several of the interviewees highlighted the impact of the gardens on children and their families in particular. In the words of one partner agency staff person, "It's different when [the children] are learning in the garden, when they're eating whatever they produce they are so proud of it. They want to continue doing it at home!" Several of the churches with schools onsite had incorporated the garden into their science curriculum with the explicit goal of promoting a love of nature, gardening and healthy living for future generations. An Episcopalian priest and garden coordinator in the project explained, "We want our kids in the next generations to enjoy it [nature]. So there's that kind of responsibility that's built into our faith."



^e Predominately African American, Latino, Asian, and White.

^f For example, the list of garden stakeholders reported in the RE-AIM data and also reported during interviews with Ad Lucem Consulting included: church leadership and members; community members; UC Extension master gardeners; university professors and students; school administrators, teachers and students; youth organizations; community-based organization staff; childcare providers; city staff; local agricultural producers and staff from supermarkets/co-ops.

"It helps us get to know somebody else, it helps us develop bonds... If I can connect to my younger sisters and brothers, who are not of the same ethnicity as I am, not my same age group, but I'm able to share with them and they're able to plant seeds in my life [that is] a win-win situation."

– Gardener

Promoting inter-racial and cross-cultural relationships

Many of the congregation members interviewed for the case story highlighted the opportunity the garden creates to connect congregation members with their surrounding communities, often across different racial and ethnic populations. According to one garden expert, "[The churches] see the garden as a space to get exposed to the community and build relationships with low-income communities of color. It's been an entry point into the community from the church." Arrive Ministries, which establishes "church refugee gardens" for recent immigrants in Minnesota has described gardens as an opportunity for "cross-cultural experiences."⁽⁹⁾ A study of the refugee gardens found that the immigrant gardeners reported increased contact and conversations with the congregation members. (1,2)

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the churches from the Los Angeles faith-based garden projects brought together individuals from multiple ethnicities^e to participate in the garden (Table 1). The diversity of participants at most of the gardens - including a variety of ethnicities and ages, as well as different community organizations and institutions^f - contributed to a perceived cross-cultural and

cross-sectoral collaboration in the gardens. More than three-quarters (76%) of the gardens reported a variety of individuals from different community organizations participating in the gardens (Table 1).

Table 1: Key Community Building Findings from Self-Reported RE-AIM Data (2015-2016)

Number of gardens that reported ethnicity of participants*	20 (87%)
Number of gardens that have participants from multiple ethnicities*	15 (65%)
Number of gardens that have a diverse group of individuals and organizations participating in and/or contributing to the garden**	22 (76%)

* Data self-reported by 4 partner agencies for 23 gardens in 2015. Data regarding ethnicity of the participants was not collected in 2016.

** Data self-reported by 4 partner agencies for 29 gardens in 2016.

Promoting inter-faith and inter-denominational relationships

Several interviewees commented that gardening creates opportunities to form relationships across different faiths and also between denominations within the Christian religion. The Los Angeles faith-based garden projects included churches of all sizes (especially smaller churches) that formed networks and collaborated together, sharing best practices for establishing gardens and at times cultivating the same garden space. One interviewee, a Catholic nun and garden coordinator, expressed that “It’s been more of an opportunity to learn...People come in with different beliefs and faiths!...When we do the blessing of the plots, I need to be very careful about the language I use! The theologies present are very different from mine...The main thing we have to do is build relationships, and become more understanding.”

CHALLENGES

Faith-based organizations face several challenges when establishing gardens that support social, emotional, and mental health and social cohesion.

Language and cultural barriers

Language barriers are a common challenge in faith-based settings.(1,2,10) Many of the congregation members interviewed discussed the challenges of overcoming language barriers, especially between gardeners who only speak English or Spanish. Other gardens grappled with cultivating relationships between English or Spanish speakers and gardeners who only spoke Asian languages or Latin American indigenous languages. The lack of bilingual church staff and bilingual gardening and/or nutrition education materials was at times problematic, although most of the partner agencies involved in the Los Angeles faith-based garden projects had bilingual staff.

In addition to language barriers, interviewees noted challenges forming relationships across different faith cultures. According to a staff person from one partner agency, “Working with churches is delicate and you need to know and speak their language. Some are called priests, fathers, regents, pastors, and there are a multitude of denominations of faith...They have different beliefs and ways of talking, ways of doing things with their churches... Being respectful and communicating appropriately is huge.”

“Inter-faith gardens are so incredibly important... This is a great way for how you’re going to overcome prejudices... Getting people of different faiths working together to garden can be truly transformative.”

~ Garden Expert

Conflicts in the garden space

Community gardens of all types are frequently rife with interpersonal conflict (7,11,12), and gardens in faith-based settings are no exception. One of the garden experts interviewed for the case story explained, "Churches need to understand and expect that there may be conflicts at gardens. This is not a space where everyone comes together and the problems of society go away, the problems just come into the space. You have to actively organize and educate so that you create a safe space that is respected and different types of folks can come together." Common conflicts among gardeners reported in the literature included: the type of produce to be planted, the use of the space (e.g., garden plots versus raised beds, shade structures and pathways), the use of water and soil amendments, and issues regarding compost and waste management.(11,12) Additionally, interviewees explained that in the faith-based setting conflicts may arise regarding the purpose of the garden (e.g., whether produce will be donated to a food pantry versus taken home for personal consumption) as well as differences of opinion between the gardeners and the rest of the congregation about the use of church property (often considered shared, collective property). One interviewee humorously noted, "I don't know if you know much about church culture, but if there is a rose bush garden and someone rips it up and puts in vegetables, people will freak out. So you have to plan ahead of time!" The lack of community and congregation engagement in the planning process, the lack of clear and well-enforced garden rules, the lack of a strong garden coordinator or leader, and the lack of a conflict resolution mechanism within the garden committee and/or church all contribute to the proliferation of conflict.(11,12)^g

Mistrust of outsiders impedes cross-cultural collaboration

Some churches, especially those whose members come from minority and/or underprivileged groups, may be wary of outside organizations coming in to help implement a garden.(13) Several of the partner agency staff interviewed discussed the importance of building trust and relationships with the churches and the central role these relationships play in leading to garden success. Furthermore, churches may not be willing to open gardens on church grounds to non-congregation members because they may be worried about issues of vandalism and security. They may also feel protective of the limited produce the garden provides. In the words of a partner agency staff person, "They may feel like it's their hard work so opening up [the garden] too much may not be interesting to them. Especially if the garden is not really big or productive, each person only gets a handful of things...The garden is a very precious resource."

Not creating a welcoming garden environment and lack of community outreach

Gardens in faith-based settings are on private property and are often behind locked fences. Despite best intentions, gardens on church property can appear exclusive and unwelcoming to the wider community. In the words of one garden expert, "What tends to happen is that [community members] see the garden as this beautiful thing in the community but think, 'it's not for me.'" The lack of bilingual signage or other communications can create a barrier. At the four gardens observed for the case story, only English garden signs were visible despite a large proportion of individuals in the neighborhood who spoke Spanish.^h

^g Also highlighted during observational interviews completed by Ad Lucem Consulting in Summer 2016.

^h Observational assessments and interviews completed by Ad Lucem Consulting in Summer 2016.

LESSONS LEARNED

Establishing gardens in faith-based settings aligns closely with the goals of faith-based organizations to serve as places of healing and community building. The act of gardening is naturally therapeutic, however, forming inter-racial, cross-cultural, and inter-faith relationships is hard work that requires significant effort, patience and dedication. In order for gardens in faith-based settings to promote social, emotional, and mental health and social cohesion, careful attention must be paid to establishing trust and credibility between the faith-based organization and the community and including diverse individuals and cultural groups in the garden's development and management. In the words of one garden expert, "If folks are involved in the process and have really bought into the idea of it, we have seen that participation is more consistent over the long term than if you simply just assume that 'if you build it [the garden] they will come'."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerged from the experience of the Los Angeles faith-based garden projects and are aimed at organizations wishing to establish gardens in faith-based settings with the goal of building community and improving social, emotional, and mental health and social cohesion:

- ❖ Engage diverse congregation and community members in the initial garden design process to understand and address the goals of the gardeners and to increase the cultural and spiritual competency of the garden program.
- ❖ Build a physical garden space (e.g., seating areas with shade structures, picnic tables, and play areas) that is conducive to contemplation and healing, community gathering and social events.
- ❖ Place bilingual signage on the garden fence that is visible from the street and includes contact information, garden hours, and how to participate in the garden.
- ❖ Establish mechanisms for resolving conflict among the gardeners, and enlist faith-based organization staff as neutral third parties to aid conflict resolution.
- ❖ Conduct ongoing garden marketing and communications to position the garden as a hub of fellowship, activity and health promotion, ensuring a steady stream of volunteer gardeners from the congregation and the wider community.
- ❖ Foster collaboration and networking across diverse faith-based organizations to cultivate inter-faith and inter-denominational relationships, share lessons learned about faith-based garden programs, and inspire other faith-based organizations to begin gardening.

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