

The problems, promise and pragmatism of community food growing: Introduction to Special Issue: 'Critical Foodscapes'

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1 **Themed issue on Critical Foodscapes:**

2
3 **The problems, promise and pragmatism of community food growing**

4
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10
11
12 **Abstract**

13
14 Alongside associated forms of socially and politically conscious food production, community
15 food growing is routinely connected to a wide range of social and environmental benefits.
16 However, robust evidence in support of these associations remains scant, and while the
17 conversation has shifted in recent years to take account of the sometimes unintended or
18 negative aspects of these activities, no consensus has been reached about how such forms
19 of food growing should adapt to new conditions, or be scaled up to maximise their positive
20 impacts. A July 2016 conference was organized to address this strategic shortfall. This
21 themed issue presents the papers resulting from the conference.

22
23
24 **Introduction**

25
26 As both long-term practitioners and researchers of community food growing (CFG), the
27 authors of this introduction to this themed issue know first-hand the profound power of CFG.
28 For many individuals involved in such initiatives, the same is no doubt true; the literature is
29 full of compelling testimonial evidence and impressive arguments as to positive impacts
30 such activities could have at larger scale. That said, robust evidence in support of these
31 strongly felt beliefs remains scant, and while the conversation has shifted in recent years to
32 take account of the sometimes unintended or negative aspects of CFG, no consensus has
33 been reached about how such forms of food growing should adapt to new conditions, or be
34 scaled up to maximise their positive impacts.

35
36 Alongside associated forms of socially and politically conscious food production, CFG is
37 routinely connected to a remarkably wide variety of issues. Even specific forms of CFG,
38 such as community gardens, are talked about in terms of their multi-functionality: the
39 American Community Garden Association, for example, suggest such spaces can provide 'a
40 catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction,

41 encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing
42 family food budgets, conserving resources and creating opportunities for recreation,
43 exercise, therapy and education' (ACGA, 2018). However, finding ways to substantiate
44 these ideas has proved difficult.

45

46 It was exactly this strategic uncertainty which created the impetus for a conference at the
47 University of Warwick in July 2016 on Critical Foodscapes. When conceived, two main
48 questions were felt to dominate theory and practice around CFG. The first was the matter of
49 definition: *What do we mean by 'community food growing'?* CFG is, quite deliberately, a
50 broad term, intended to represent a wide variety of practices. As a result, CFG means
51 different things depending on when and where one is situated (see Guitart et al., 2012). As
52 has been noted, for example, disparities between approaches to CFG are particularly
53 noticeable between the Global North and the Global South, where forms of collective food
54 growing 'are often not a choice; they are a means of survival' (Opitz et al., 2016). However,
55 this is far from being a hard and fast rule, as evidenced by community gardens in the United
56 States, especially those intending to address food insecurity associated with food deserts
57 (WinklerPrins, 2017).

58

59 Even when focused on the Global North, however, CFG can be protean in the extreme,
60 where evidence is emerging of aspects of the approach being co-opted or adopted by less
61 community-based institutions (Pudup, 2008). CFG also falls under and alongside other
62 forms of food growing which are not yet clearly defined; for example, peri-urban and urban
63 agriculture (Opitz et al., 2016), community supported agriculture (Galt et al., 2016),
64 community gardens (Krasny and Tidball, 2017), and guerilla gardening (Finn, 2014).

65

66 CFG and associated forms of cultivation present a confoundingly complex and only partially-
67 mapped landscape of practices, meanings, and forms. However, such definitional
68 confusions - while frustrating - are crucial for those of us who wish to ask why and for whom

69 such spaces exist. In this themed issue introduction, we pause to acknowledge the
70 importance of such debates in the ongoing struggle to shape just and sustainable food
71 systems, especially where they help identify new or previously submerged injustices. In the
72 interests of clarity, however, we also move to identify a reflexively simple and provisional
73 definition; that is, following Guitart et al.'s (2012) discussion, we understand the term
74 'community food growing' as denoting initiatives which are "managed and operated by
75 members of a local community in which food or flowers are cultivated" (p. 364). This
76 definition is adopted here, not only because it draws on some of the most widely-cited
77 articles about CFG (Pudup, 2008; Kingsley et al., 2009), but also because it is simple
78 enough to capture the heterogeneous nature of practices in evidence, and explored at the
79 conference.

80

81 The second question relates to how academics might best give CFG initiatives greater
82 strength and visibility. A growing number of CFG initiatives are appearing, and academics,
83 governments, and non-governmental organisations alike are striving to make sense of and
84 support them. Despite a long history of being understood as having straightforwardly positive
85 political, social, and environmental benefits, recent research on CFG initiatives has returned
86 mixed results, with some outwardly pessimistic contributions - notably those suggesting
87 complicity with the forces of neoliberalism (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Pudup, 2008).
88 More ambivalent responses (e.g. McClintock, 2014 and Tornaghi, 2014) have tended to
89 point out CFG's complicated entanglements in ostensibly contradictory politics, not least
90 tensions between gardens' pedestrian or conformist aspects and their radical promise.
91 Extremely useful and influential in this regard is McClintock's (2014) paper, which invites us
92 to embrace such tensions, suggesting that 'coming to terms with its internal contradictions
93 can help better position urban agriculture within a coordinated effort for structural change' (p.
94 149).

95

96 The papers cited above have been instrumental in signaling the need for more substantial
97 efforts to build a robust evidence base and for academic insight to further strengthen the
98 practice and influence of CFG. Not only have they been successful in highlighting a plethora
99 of research gaps, but also the pervasiveness of unexamined assumptions and unconscious
100 biases apparent in the study and practice of CFG. The following section attempts to sketch
101 out this recent research in more detail, as well as Critical Foodscapes position within this.

102

103 **Recent research**

104

105 The *Critical Foodscapes* themed issue comes at a time when CFG research has been
106 developing and evolving rapidly, much like the practice itself. Several literature reviews have
107 considered CFG in its various forms, including community gardens (Guitart et al., 2012)
108 urban agriculture in developed countries (Mok et al., 2014), and urban home food gardens
109 (Taylor and Lovell, 2014). Most of the literature about community gardens has considered
110 those in “low income earning areas with different cultural backgrounds in industrial cities in
111 the USA,” reflecting a socio-political interest in these areas (Guitart et al., 2012, p. 368). The
112 grey literature offers a much more substantive focus on CFG in developing countries (ie.
113 FAO, 2007; World Bank, 2013). CFG has been considered by a variety of disciplines which
114 have produced evidence of the range of benefits and motivations associated with these
115 projects (Guitart et al., 2012). These include community development and cohesion, mental
116 and physical health benefits, education, economic benefits, and political and personal
117 empowerment (see especially Jackson, 2017 in this issue). Whilst positive environmental
118 outcomes have been credited to community gardens, few of these claims are substantiated
119 by studies from a natural sciences perspective or quantitative methodologies (Guitart et al.,
120 2012). Other gaps include impacts of urban sprawl on, understanding governmental support
121 for, impacts of pollutants in, and the carbon footprint of urban food growing, as well as how
122 urban food growing can contribute to the self-sufficiency of cities (Mok et al., 2013).

123

124 *Problematizing Community Food Growing*

125 The positive potential for CFG is increasingly being problematized: Examples include
126 Guthman's (2008) description of community gardening as a vehicle to impose "whitened
127 cultural practices" on African American-inhabited neighbourhoods (p. 431). McClintock
128 (2014) has outlined the different paradigms through which stakeholders in urban agriculture
129 engage with these initiatives, and mapped some of the internal contradictions. There are
130 also competing visions of what the purpose of CFG is, with a distinct divide between those
131 who view it as a "food producing practice" (Tornaghi, 2017, p. 783) and those who feel "the
132 main benefits of urban cultivation are social" (Martin et al., 2014, p. 752). This tension
133 remains largely unresolved, both within and outside academia, and rather than needing
134 resolution, might help to deepen our understanding of CFG as a site of ongoing contestation
135 of meaning and practice (McClintock, 2014).

136

137 The value of CFG has also been problematised through work which brings a local nuance to
138 generalised claims for its beneficial impacts. For example, for those areas regarded as food
139 deserts (Wang et al., 2014), and its influence on diet and nutrition (Castro et al., 2013; Grier
140 et al., 2014), may be specific to certain local contexts, so not possible everywhere. Some
141 articles in this themed issue extend the academic debate in this way: Bonow and Normark
142 provide insight into a Swedish case study, finding that CFG makes a limited contribution to
143 Stockholm's vision of a 'sustainable city', whilst Jackson explores the production of social
144 capital in community gardens in one UK city.

145

146 *Policy Development*

147 There is also an increasing interest in considering CFG in the more holistic context of city-
148 region food systems (FAO & RUAF, 2015) and integrating gardens within future urban
149 planning and policy. For example, in 2015, 138 cities from all over the world signed up to the

150 Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2015) to commit to improving urban food system governance
151 in order to deliver socially and environmentally sustainable food systems. There has also
152 been documentation of food practice in urban food policy (IPES, 2017), while speakers at
153 *Critical Foodscapes* noted the rise of cities as locus for strategies driving food system
154 innovation (see Keech and Reed, this issue).

155

156 Following calls for policy development (e.g. van Veenhuizen and Danso, 2007), the need to
157 manage the explosion of interest of CFG and to genuinely address issues of food insecurity
158 through landscape scale delivery (Smith et al., 2013), governments at all levels are
159 developing policies to support its development (Jermé & Wakefield, 2013; Laycock, 2013)
160 (see also the Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). These policies -
161 or “new political spaces” (Hajer, 2003) - are not particularly well-researched, likely due to
162 their informal nature (as in Laycock, 2013), or operation outside conventional policy
163 frameworks (Cohen and Reynolds, 2014; Hardman and Larkham, 2014).

164

165 *Environmental Outcomes & Quantification of Outcomes*

166 Following Guitart et al.’s (2012) calls to address a lack of empirical evidence of
167 environmental outcomes in CFG, a number of scholars have attempted to redress the gap.
168 Examples include work on soil contamination in community gardens (Bugdalski et al., 2013;
169 Mitchell et al., 2014), biodiversity and ecosystem services (Orsini et al., 2014; Birkin and
170 Goulson, 2015; Speak et al., 2015), and agrobiodiversity (Guitart et al., 2014). There has
171 also been work to develop frameworks for measuring environmental outcomes, such as
172 Farming Concrete’s Data Collection Toolkit (Design Trust for Public Space, 2015) for
173 community gardens and farms and Goldstein et al.’s (2014) development of typologies of
174 urban agriculture in order to quantify environmental ‘foodprints.’

175

176 In addition to these empirical works, reviews have considered the environmental outcomes
177 of CFG. For example, Ferguson and Lovell (2014) reviewed academic and grey literature to
178 explore permaculture as an agroecological practice, whilst Lin et al. (2015) focused on
179 biodiversity and ecosystem services. There has been increasing effort to quantify other non-
180 environmental outcomes of community gardens, such as the amount of money participants
181 save on their food (Algert et al., 2014), and crop yields (Gittleman et al., 2012; CoDyre et al.,
182 2015). One paper in this collection proposes an alternative form of Sustainability Impact
183 Assessment applicable to community growing initiatives (Schmutz et al.).

184

185 *Participatory Methodologies*

186 Participatory approaches have long been used in studies of CFG, however, a much more
187 diverse and creative set of methodologies and methods are now being adopted. These
188 include Participatory Action Research (Bryant and Chahine, 2016; Marsh et al., 2017), youth
189 peer interviews (Lile and Richards, 2016), citizen science (Birkin and Goulson, 2015),
190 participatory mapping (Shillington, 2013), Photovoice (Boston et al., 2015; Harper and
191 Alfonso, 2016), and participatory video (Yap, 2017). These methods provide some of the
192 most fertile terrain for not only filling many of CFG's 'research gaps', but for simultaneously
193 building capacity and long-term resilience (People's Knowledge Collective, 2017). The extent
194 to which these approaches are delivering genuine participation for community food growers
195 could become one of the most important horizons for the future study of CFG.

196

197 **Overview of the issue**

198

199 As the above review indicates, a wealth of CFG activity is feeding a similar abundance of
200 academic work, which increasingly draws out complexities and tensions, questioning what
201 projects aspire to and can achieve. It was within this context that *Critical Foodscapes* was
202 conceived, as a forum bringing together researchers, practitioners and many who straddle

203 the two roles. The conference aimed for a critical approach to CFG, to bring to light often
204 hidden problems, whilst aiming to remain constructive so as to generate solution-oriented
205 discussion.

206

207 Articles in this issue criss-cross the terrain of these issues, and the globe, presenting a
208 range of approaches to studying CFG. Two papers position CFG in relation to sustainability,
209 and consider the extent to which it advances sustainability. Bonow and Normark provide a
210 case study of community gardening in Stockholm, Sweden in which they are critical of the
211 degree to which present forms of CFG contribute to sustainability, suggesting that an
212 instrumental approach to governance limits the projects' impacts and longevity. Schmutz et
213 al. introduce Sustainability Impact Assessment as a tool to compare forms of short food
214 supply chain, including home and community growing initiatives. Applying this tool to
215 compare how producers and consumers in London perceive multiple dimensions of food
216 sustainability reveals interesting contrasts between their perspectives. Also taking a UK
217 perspective is the paper by Jackson which focuses on one pillar of sustainability: the social.
218 Her case study of community gardens in Lincoln considers how they have contributed to
219 building social capital locally and argues that the main asset of community gardening is its
220 "flexible and holistic approach" to community building.

221

222 The nature and form of spaces occupied and utilised by CFG initiatives is a theme across
223 the remaining papers. Susan Haedicke describes what was on the surface an artistic project
224 to beautify and enliven a neglected urban space in Paris. But, as she describes, the stories
225 generated and exchanged by the Aroma Home project critique contemporary urban life, and
226 provide politically charged tales of how it could be different. Rebecca St. Claire and
227 colleagues bring a temporal dimension to these spatial issues through focusing on a
228 'meanwhile' or temporary growing site. They suggest that such spaces offer multiple and
229 diverse benefits, yet questions remain regarding the practicalities of urban sites which are
230 only offered for CFG on a temporary basis. Virtual and networked spaces come to the fore

231 as Dan Keech and Matt Reed consider online media as a central aspect of food activism in
232 cities. Focusing on activists in Bristol, UK they examine a variety of traditional and social
233 media, identifying a clear divide between how movements represent themselves and how
234 others portray their agenda, with implications which limit activists' power to influence. Finally,
235 Rosenfeld and Kell explore food plants crossing global borders to live across time and space
236 in the form of crops grown beyond the region where they were traditionally cultivated. They
237 highlight a multitude of benefits growers obtain through cultivating exotic crops, and the
238 need to provide support for continued cultivation by current and future generations in order
239 to maintain important plant diversity adapted to local growing conditions.

240

241 **Conclusion**

242

243 One of the ironies of academic inquiry is that it tends to generate questions rather than
244 resolving them - but we embrace this as part of the journey towards a reflexive politics. A
245 theme shared by all the papers in this issue is the capacity of CFG initiatives to strengthen
246 social and political networks, and provide platforms to address shortfalls in citizen
247 participation in food system governance. In this regard, researchers are well placed to
248 engage with CFG, using the wealth of participatory research methodologies available,
249 especially those which valorise co-production of knowledge at all stages of the research
250 design and implementation. This is an approach which is now widely called for in social
251 science and agricultural research (IPES, 2016), but remains under-developed and under-
252 utilised.

253

254 The issues raised by *Critical Foodscapes* suggest the importance of taking a step back to
255 consider the bigger-picture context of CFG, and fundamental questions, not least what we
256 as academics aim to achieve. Whatever the question in immediate view, the main
257 challenges for future CFG research, we suggest, centre on how the research itself can

258 harmonise with the participatory and collaborative ethos embodied by the majority of CFG
259 projects. The people-centred nature of CFG means that in order to support its progress,
260 future academic work should begin with the intention of engaging participants as co-
261 producers of knowledge.

262

263 In this respect, while Critical Foodscapes began looking for missing evidence for CFG's
264 (often material) 'benefits', our principal reflections relate to CFG's as a powerful site of
265 convergence for various movements aiming for social justice. To this end, CFG research
266 must immediately cease to be yet another form of inquiry which is *done to* its participants;
267 instead it must continue to develop as a place of integration between the aims of
268 researchers and practitioners. That is, to operationalise the ideal once espoused by
269 indigenous activist Lilla Watson: 'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your
270 time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work
271 together' (qtd. in Treviño and McCormack 2016).

272

273

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275

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