

# HOW COULD WE STRENGTHEN SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR FOOD GARDENING?

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Widespread hunger in the world is due mainly to the fact that people don't care enough about one another's well-being. Caring can be increased by encouraging social interaction. This can be done in many different ways, but the core idea here is to help people produce food for themselves. Many people who produce food in their own gardens gladly share it with their neighbors. They also share their knowledge and enthusiasm for gardening. This is a huge underutilized resource. The project proposed here is intended to facilitate that sharing.

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My purpose here is not simply to advocate food gardening, but to explore ways to facilitate strong person-to-person social support for food gardening. This could improve the food supply for those who need it and also strengthen our caring for one another's well-being. Many people who produce food in their gardens gladly share it with their neighbors. They also share their knowledge and enthusiasm for gardening. This is a huge underutilized resource. (Kent 2016; Kent 2011, 110-121; Kent 2018a; Kent 2019a).

Producing food can be very worthwhile. It is a pleasant way to get exercise, improve the environment, have a healthier diet, relax and improve mental health, and save money. There are other benefits that we are just beginning to understand (Cassella 2020; Roslund et al. 2020). Here, the focus is on social aspects of food gardening. Knowing how to produce your own food establishes a do-it-yourself safety net, increasing your capacity to cope with disasters and fluctuating food prices. Food gardening improves food security, helps to strengthen local communities, and empowers individuals and their families. As I pointed out elsewhere:

Home and community-based food production can be useful in many ways, and not just for the immediate nutritional value. To grasp the potential importance of household food production, we can fantasize about how things would change if all people could easily produce all the food they needed at little or no cost. Then, in economic terms, people would not be so dependent on one another. People who produced food on their own would not have to accept miserable jobs. They could

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engage in economic relationships when they wanted to, but they would have more freedom to turn away and say no. (Kent 2011, 121)

In other words, food gardening can be liberating.

There are excellent books on food gardening, some providing step-by-step guidance. Searching the Internet on terms such as “household (or homestead) food production,” “kitchen gardens” or “planting vegetables” turns up a lot of relevant material. In some countries, YouTube offers relevant videos. However, it is not always easy for gardeners to get the right information at the right time and in the right form. It can be difficult to figure out which plants, trees, or animals to produce. Which would make a worthwhile contribution to the family’s diet, and which choices would be likely to succeed in the individual’s specific setting? It can be difficult to get local hands-on advice that matches up with the local physical environment and the local culture.

Social support should be provided not only where food gardening is already commonplace, but also where there is little of it and people rarely imagine it. Many people don’t know about the gardening that can be done in buckets and bags and on windowsills, balconies, rooftops and walls. There are many obstacles to food gardening such as little access to land and the risk of theft of the products by predatory animals or people. The challenge is to find ways to overcome or work around the obstacles. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations promotes micro-gardens for those who have little access to land (FAO 2020a). Searching on the Internet brings up more than 65 million items on desert gardening. The best known is *Sowing Seeds in the Desert* (Fukuoka 2012). In *Defiant Gardens*, Kenneth Helphand showed many ways in which gardens can thrive even in challenging conditions (Helphand 2006). The website at <http://defiantgardens.com/> offers many examples. This essay dwells on the opportunities, not the obstacles. There are many good stories about how people have overcome obstacles, stories that should be shared more widely.

Food gardening here refers to household food production, not the production of flowers or ornamental plants. It includes many kinds of small-scale food production, not just fruits and vegetables planted in soil. For the purposes of this discussion, “gardening” can include sprouting, hydroponics, aquaponics, permaculture, small animal production, and other methods. Maintaining fruit trees is a form of household food production. The emphasis here is on foods produced mainly for direct consumption rather than for sale. The focus is on producing food, not money (Kent 2018b).

The term “social support” is used here to refer to nongovernmental, informal, and convivial social relations through which people help one another. It very different from “social protection” that is provided through governmental programs designed to help people in need or at risk (FAO 2020b).

Helping needy people provide for themselves might be more likely to benefit them than costly top-down global strategies such as Scaling Up Nutrition (Scaling Up Nutrition 2020) and One-CGIAR, formerly the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (One CGIAR 2020). Helping people help themselves, individually and in community with others is likely to be more welcome than having outsiders design nutrition interventions to be undertaken by outsiders

(REFINE 2020). Humanitarian assistance through food aid and other charitable programs is sometimes necessary, especially in sudden emergencies. Supporting home gardening is more empowering for the long term, an effort to make charity unnecessary.

For the purposes of this essay, “producing” includes not only growing food products but also preserving and preparing them for consumption. Some of this gardening might take place in small plots at a distance from the main homestead, possibly in spaces designated for the purpose by the local government.

The primary concern here is the social dimension of food gardening, not the technology. There is already a great deal of social interaction relating to food gardening, but it can be strengthened, in modest ways and in ambitious ways. It is even possible to imagine a global *Food Gardeners Network*, based on interconnected organizations at various levels, local, regional, national and global.

Often people who are interested in producing food at home can find neighbors who will gladly provide advice and encouragement. This relationship can be regularized with the formation of local organizations of people who share that interest. Local gardening groups could hold regular meetings and they could arrange meals together at regular intervals. Participants could bring dishes that demonstrate items they have grown and prepared. They could take turns reporting on their successes and their difficulties. These meetings could facilitate the sharing of seeds and starter plants. The social aspect of food gardening is very different from that of other systems of food production such as industrial agriculture and food manufacture.

The organizers of group meals could invite guests who are curious about household food production and want an introduction to it. The guests could be asked to bring any sort of food or drink item they wished. If they came empty-handed, they could be invited to drop a bit of money into a bowl. These meetings could become convivial gatherings, attractive for the good food and fellowship they offer. The group could organize classes and invite outside experts to talk about issues of interest.

In the approach advocated here, local groups would facilitate peer-to-peer support through the exchange of information and ideas about food gardening. The participants would function as both teachers and learners. Apart from the meetings, participants would be encouraged to visit each other to admire and advise on their gardens. They could visit different groups – the young and old, the rural and the urban – exchanging ideas, challenges and solutions. Local networking of food gardeners is about appreciating that there are experts within your reach who are glad to help.

Local groups might be comprised mainly of people who know each other and meet from time to time on a face-to-face basis in pleasant social events. They could be supported by regional groups that cover large geographical regions, perhaps subnational governance units such as states and provinces. Where there are no small local groups, individuals interested in food gardening could be served by regional groups.

If funding for it could be obtained, local Food Gardeners' Networks could be coordinated and facilitated by a *Global Food Gardeners Center*. It could provide support services to national and regional Food Gardeners Networks so that they, in turn could provide useful services to gardeners. The system could have a website that serves as an information portal, beginning with a library of documents and videos available through the Internet. Gardeners would access the information and services on the Internet directly through their personal computers and cell phones or through local community groups that make the Internet-based resources available to them.

The whole network could be stitched together by taking full advantage of the Internet. With the help of the local networks, the central office could maintain a cloud-based library of relevant documents and videos, and it could facilitate Internet-based discussions and short courses, locally, regionally, and globally. People who cannot access Internet services directly could benefit from Internet resources through their local *Food Gardeners Club*.

The funding needed by the global center would be lower if some tasks were delegated to local Food Gardeners Networks. One of them could set up the website and maintain it. Others could maintain specific sections of the website. For example, a local network could maintain a global list of local networks, including names and contact information for the representatives they select. The list could also describe special interests of the local groups. Some might develop expertise on growing a particular species and share that globally. Another could focus on gardening for products that would be especially useful for preventing wasting and stunting in young children (Rotary 2020). The global networking system would open many opportunities for providing social support over great distances.

People live in the world-as-a-whole, in countries, and in subnational governance units such as states and provinces, but they are distant, abstract. Real life takes place in local communities, in day-to-day interactions with shopkeepers, neighbors, and friends. We tend to care about the well-being of our neighbors more than we care about people who are far away. The Food Gardeners Network envisioned here would explore ways of strengthening that local caring by facilitating face-to-face social interaction at the community level. Doing this would be good intrinsically, and by helping to build the sense of community, it would help in addressing hunger and other social issues such as poverty, crime, and violence (Kent 2019b).

Many skilled gardeners produce more food than they need, so they share or sell some to others. Sharing food is a good way to use it up. In contrast, the supply of information, ideas, and enthusiasm *increases* as they are shared. In that sense, the Food Gardeners Networks could be very productive. If networking is done systematically, the information, ideas, and enthusiasm it produces would increase and it would reach more of the people who need it most.

One way to arrange this would be to divide up the work so that different clusters are set up for different food products. It could begin by focusing on products that are easy to produce and are of high nutritive value such as cowpeas, hibiscus fruit, and chicken eggs. Each would have its own leader to guide the collection of documents and videos on the topic and facilitate online and face-to-face discussions about their special topics. In addition to the product-centered topics,

some people might be willing to lead discussions on other topics such as gardening in mountainous areas, dry areas, schools, retirement homes, refugee camps, or prisons.

The topic specialists would create their own path as they walk it, and also exchange views on how they do that. Some might seek grant funds while others might rely entirely on volunteers and their creativity. The topic leaders would not have to be experts themselves, but they should be able to find people who could contribute to the effort, each in their own way.

There are other networks and projects that focus on home gardening. For example, there is the HG4RR project, Home Gardens for Resilience and Recovery, based in Berlin:

The main objective of HG4RR is to establish an international network of experts (researchers and practitioners from South and East Asia and Europe) to advance our knowledge on topics related to home gardens, resilience, food security, and interventions.

With this network, we would like to deepen our understanding of how informal small-scale home gardening acts as a coping strategy to strengthen the food and nutritional security and resilience of vulnerable households living under extreme uncertainty or in humanitarian crises. (ISDC 2020)

In contrast, the Food Gardeners Network envisioned here is intended to be driven by and benefit households directly and reach out to vulnerable households. Potentially, the two different approaches could complement one another. The Food Gardeners Network could be viewed as a pathway for applying the information and ideas developed through HG4RR.

An important element in the Food Gardeners Networks would be the human touch. Modern communications technology often delivers information in ways that are cold and lifeless. Gardening information is likely to be more useful if it is delivered along with sustained hands-on face-to-face support from friendly local people who know the local situation. Good how-to-do-it information on food gardening should be backed up with vigorous and sustained human support whether face-to-face or through the Internet. Just as a seedling requires sustained attention from the gardener, there is also a need for sustained nurturing of gardeners.

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### **STACIA NORDIN'S COMMENTS ON FOOD GARDENER NETWORKS**

I am Stacia Nordin, a Registered Dietitian and a food gardener for 25 years. I have assisted many groups in starting food gardens in homes, communities, hospitals, religious centers, schools, offices, restaurants, hotels, and more. The ones that seem to thrive and be sustained best are the ones that have a social support network.

I'd love to see social support grow so that *Food Gardener Networks* are more available to more people in more places, all connected in useful ways. There are already many local groups in place that would benefit from networking.

There is an online Home Gardening Group that has been working on social support for food gardeners. If you are interested in the ideas outlined in George Kent's article, we welcome you to join us at: <https://dgroups.org/fao/home-gardening/>

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