

The Healthy People 2010 Initiative, a national framework for public health prevention, suggests that individual health is inseparable from the health of the larger community. Understanding and improving this larger community – the places people live, work and recreate – will go a long way to promoting health and strengthening neighborhoods. Since 2004 Denver Urban Gardens and the Colorado School of Public Health have worked together, through the “Gardens Growing Healthy Communities” community-based research initiative, to explore how gardens, as neighborhood places, support healthy living.

Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Health Protection Research Initiative and extended by additional funding from the Colorado Clinical and Translational Sciences Institute and the J.R. Albert Foundation.

Key Findings

Health Benefits

- As well as eating better, being more active, and having healthier metrics for self-rated health and body mass index, gardeners are more involved in social activities, view their neighborhoods as more beautiful, and have stronger ties to their neighborhoods (Litt et al., 2011).
- More than 50% of community gardeners meet national guidelines for fruit and vegetable intake, compared to 25% of non-gardeners (Litt et al., 2011).
- Community gardeners consume 5.7 servings of fruits and vegetables per day on average, compared to 3.9 servings for non-gardeners. These differences persist after adjusting for individual socioeconomic and neighborhood factors (Litt et al., 2011).
- The body mass index is 24.2 for community gardeners, compared to 27.2 for non-gardeners.



Social and Ecological Benefits

- 100% of community gardeners stated that their main reasons for gardening were to be outside in nature and to get their hands dirty. Almost 80% of them gardened as children (Litt et al., in prep).
- 95% of community gardeners give away some of the produce they grow to friends, family and people in need; 60% specifically donate to food assistance programs (Litt et al., in prep).



Neighborhood Benefits

- Community gardens promote stronger neighborhood leadership, outreach, and volunteerism (Teig et al., 2009).
- They strengthen emotional bonds to the neighborhood (Comstock et al., 2010) and aesthetic appreciation (Hale et al., 2011).
- 88% of people who do not garden want to see gardens in their neighborhood (Litt et al., in prep).



Rx for Healthy Place-Making

This research highlights the importance of intentionally supporting neighborhood environments and social processes that promote a strong sense of community, also referred to as “healthy place-making.” It indicates that healthy places are especially important when they embody diverse ecological, social and cultural attributes.

Community gardens demonstrate one very viable strategy to achieve healthy place-making and foster improved health when the:

Ecological attributes of gardens reflect a place:

- to be outside in nature and to get hands dirty
- to grow plants – flowers, herbs and food crops
- that can be used for multiple purposes
- that is central, visible and accessible
- that serves as a local destination
- that promotes interactions with nature, people and environmental values

Social attributes of gardens reflect a place:

- to socialize and get to know your neighbors
- to build trust and develop pride
- to receive and offer encouragement
- to share stories, successes and food
- to foster respect for others and bridge generations
- to build a stronger sense of community

Cultural attributes of gardens reflect a place:

- to develop emotional and spiritual connections
- to express heritage and traditions
- to develop a worldview
- to develop a unique community identity
- for participants and neighborhood residents to experience beauty



References:

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Conclusion

When a neighborhood place embodies these ecological, social and cultural attributes, it becomes a place that naturally promotes wellness. A community garden is more than a good idea among a select group of people; it is a community model for healthy living.

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For more information, please email us at dirt@dug.org.

To view our documentary please visit <http://vimeo.com/21818738>

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Layout design by Kathleen Trimble of the Children, Youth and Environments Center for Community Engagement, University of Colorado