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.

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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

**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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**References:**


