

ACT Community Garden and City Farm gardeners: addressing the climatic and COVID-19 challenges of 2020

In 2021, the University of Canberra undertook research into the impact of the multiple challenges of drought, bushfires, hail, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic on different parts of the local food system of the ACT. This work aimed to determine the pivotal challenges to producing and supplying local food and to identify the most useful solutions towards recovery and support. As part of this, various stakeholders comprising members of the Canberra City Farm and Canberra Organic Growers community gardens were interviewed. Responses were anonymised and summarised as follows.

Community Gardens and the Canberra City Farm have a much larger community role beyond growing food

Although half those interviewed reported growing more than 50 % of their vegetables in Community Gardens (used here as a term inclusive of the Canberra City Farm), the importance of Community Gardens as recreation (ie gardening as a hobby), a place to socialise and connect with likeminded people, to learn and share knowledge and spend time in nature was highlighted. Some people also valued Community Gardens for the opportunity to do something positive when times were challenging. Many people were passionate about their role in enhancing food system resilience, even if not called by this name.

Resilience is the ability to prepare for, withstand, and recover from a crisis or disruption.

A *resilient food system* is able to withstand and recover from disruptions in a way that ensures a sufficient supply of acceptable and accessible food for all.

Community resilience is an evolving term that includes local knowledge, community networks and relationships, communication, health, governance and leadership, resources, economic investment, preparedness, and mental outlook

The Community Gardens and their members were impacted by the environmental disasters of 2020 in various ways: heatwaves and haze affected plant growth, gardeners had to attend gardens despite hazardous air quality in January 2020, hail damaged infrastructure and excessive rain spoilt harvests. These events were not considered unusually disruptive.

Staying open during COVID-19 benefitted the broader community

The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions in 2020 highlighted the broader social contributions that Community Gardens provide. Community Gardens were granted exemptions to stay open by the ACT Government and members appreciated the opportunity to have somewhere to go, to do their gardening, be outdoors, connect with nature, connect with others within the social distancing and hygiene restrictions - even though face to face meetings and workshops ceased.

Public interest in Community Gardens - both in seeking membership or just knowledge about gardening, increased substantially during this period. This corresponded with high demand for seeds, seedlings, backyard poultry, and panic buying across the ACT as people responded to the uncertainty of living under enforced lockdowns.

Community Gardens contribute to community growth, well-being and resilience.

Community Gardens contribute significantly to local food in the Canberra region. They do so not only via the food produced, but also by acting as an alternative to mainstream supply channels, and as a source of local food production knowledge, thus contributing to local food system resilience. Community Garden members are passionate about a range of ways to increase food production and to reduce waste for themselves and for the community. The existing land tenure arrangements preclude commercial production so excess produce moves through sharing networks or is sold to benefit the group. This fosters thinking about food differently and insight into a food system transformed to value people and environment. While difficult to assess the amount of food produced, some members suggested co-ordination across and within community gardens would be required to produce a broader variety of food.

This study indicates that Community Gardeners recognise the substantial time and other inputs required to produce food, but this is far outweighed by the benefits of fresh, organic produce, a sense of self-sufficiency, opportunities to share produce and positive mental health, social wellbeing and community belonging. Some of the interviewees were strongly motivated by the opportunity to do something positive for the broader community, i.e. agency during disasters. Many donated excess produce to charity and all recognised the value of sharing knowledge. Community Gardens thus generate substantial returns on initial investment.

Conclusion

This study found that Community Gardens have an important role in assuring community resilience, and this is probably even more important than food system resilience.

The 2020 combination of local natural, social and economic challenges presented a significant research opportunity to develop insights towards enhanced food system resilience. Several recent studies overseas have considered that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic provides insights into future challenges from climate change and associated pressures on urban food systems: arguably we have experienced this combination already.

Community Gardens were seen as a community resource during the first COVID-19 lockdown when people were concerned about food system disruptions. They also were a place to address isolation (during lockdowns) and eco-anxiety (during the Black Summer). Food system and community resilience both deserve further research. For food system resilience it would be useful to understand exactly how much food is being produced privately and in community gardens – particularly against a standard, healthy diet. It would also be useful to know the contribution of Community Gardens to community resilience – and whether this is a source of social, and therefore, health inequity.

This proposed research would provide an even stronger basis for the establishment of more Community Gardens in the ACT.

Dr Ro McFarlane
food.futures@canberra.edu.au
ro.mcfarlane@canberra.edu.au
University of Canberra
9.12.21