Food Security Through Decentralized Neighborhood Farming
United States | Reed College
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Summary
We built and operated a decentralized urban farm in the Woodstock neighborhood of Portland, Oregon. Using land donated by neighbors, we created seven flourishing, diverse garden sites that produced fresh vegetables for our community food pantry.

Project Description
● How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project? Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

The issue and location of the project emerged from our environments. When Alec was volunteering at the church’s food drive, Kristin, the Woodstock pantry coordinator, was explaining to the volunteers that community partners, including community gardens and neighbors, had donated food to the church in previous summers and that it was much appreciated. This, combined with our curiosity and respect for movements that convert lawns into food production space, manifested into our project. The sites were chosen based on proximity to our center of operations, a house in the Woodstock neighborhood where Alec lives.

● What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?

Most significantly, we didn’t offer/give all that much tangible gardening knowledge to the land lenders. We underestimated how much learning we had to do and ended up taking the space and time to learn ourselves. In the following growing season at each of these sites, we will offer occasional educational site visits and material support to the participating neighbors. We have also considered making some educational media such as a booklet that explains the process of building and maintaining a garden for neighbors to consult. Another change was that we did not only build raised beds, but also dug in-ground beds for some neighbors, which often required manually removing the sod from people’s lawns. Though we did not formally plan for this, the process is more closely aligned with our goal of building local fertility independent of external outputs. Lastly, while we had initially planned to install drip irrigation, we decided that we would have the time to hand water each of our sites, with help from our neighbors. This gave us a more intimate relationship of daily care with our plants and allowed us to observe the gardens as they changed through the season.

● Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

The project depended on the donations of land and water from the participants. We did not raise any other monetary funds outside of the grant.

● Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe.

Yes, we intend to coordinate with SEEDS, Reed’s Community Engagement program, to create 2 or 4 positions to build on the social and physical infrastructure we have developed this summer. With some effort in coordination, we think it will be possible to create a long-lasting relationship between Reed and Patchwork Farms because of the close proximity, students interested in agricultural work, and support from groups like SEEDS or the Reed Sustainability Committee. If and when this relationship is formed, the existing home-owners will slowly take responsibility for their respective sites, while relationships with new homeowners will be formed and grown.
Reflection
● How do you define peace?

We both resist conventional definitions of peace, particularly the ideal of a universal peace. We do not think that peace is a pure state of harmony or a complete cessation of violence. It seems to us that peace in one place fundamentally depends on violence elsewhere, or at a different scale. For example, the land we gardened on is part of a legacy of theft from indigenous peoples, even if it was donated freely to us for the purposes of the project. The donation of fresh produce to the food insecure humans of our neighborhood was contingent on the genocide of thousands of squash bugs, fish (for fertilizers), and indigenous and black humans. Instead, we offer a framework for peace as a condition for productive tension, under which difference and contrast can produce positive emergent outcomes. Within this framework, violence is openly acknowledged as a necessary condition for peace but actively redirected from historically targeted/neglected communities and beings to the extent possible. Put differently: a peaceful community is one that can resolve internal tensions or use them towards positive ends, while remaining vigilant of the costs (both local and distant) of the peace they have achieved and pursuing an equitable and just distribution of negative externalities.

● In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?

Based on our definition of peace as a condition for productive tension, we feel our project has accomplished the following: 1. It bolstered community members’ awareness/accountability to food insecurity in their neighborhood. This is an important step in creating a better integrated community that is compassionate towards difference. 2. It opened up communications between neighbors that may not have otherwise connected with each other. We think that the isolation of the American neighborhood is one of the greatest barriers to building strong, respectful communities. Getting to know the people you live closest to and share the land with is an essential part of truly being somewhere and developing a sense of love and responsibility for it. Front yard gardens are accessible, visually striking spaces that prompt stops from curious visitors and discussion about garden practices. They can also be somewhat divisive (our in-ground beds definitely drew more attention, and it was not always positive). This created an opportunity to address our neighbor’s discomforts and dig into the often unquestioned sacredness of the empty American lawn. 3. It better integrated lawn space into the urban ecology by creating habitat for pollinators (insects, birds) and soil organisms (stinky pete, actinorhizal Khalil, hairy sally, dirty dave, Alec the trogloidyte). The increasingly fragmented nature of the urban landscape divides ecosystems and promotes an inefficient circulation of life energy. It excludes beings whose lives and relationships we depend on for our livelihoods. We seek to return to a state of “good relation” (a concept advanced by many indigenous scholars) with our environment and the diversity of beings that constitute it. 4. Lastly, it created circumstances (access to fresh produce) for reducing hunger and thus mitigating local violence perpetuated onto food insecure communities by governance and other forces of systemic inequality. Well-fed communities deal with conflict better and have more energy to direct their lives and develop their community as they intend.

● Identify a significant conflict you observed or encountered in your work (it could be any level of relationship: intra- or inter-personal, community/group based, and/or societal/global). How did you navigate the conflict and what would you like to learn more about as a result?
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Fortunately, we feel we had a fairly conflict free experience with our project. The conflict we did experience mostly revolved around the everyday challenges of growing food, particularly in an urban setting and within a decentralized model. While this model allowed us to acquire far more land than we would have had access to otherwise, it also meant oversight and management were challenging at times. Each of our sites had different conditions, from sun and pest exposure to varying levels of involvement from the property owner. Some of our partners donated their water and did their own time maintaining the garden, while others did not. Some sites had far more flowers and pre-existing vegetation that attracted pollinators, which made a huge difference in our yields. This variability led to a spectrum of success across our sites which compromised our overall output. Seeing how our more successful sites flourished showed us the potential that each of our sites could have had with the right care. Each site was also incredibly biodiverse, and each plant had different preferences and tolerances. Meeting the needs of each of our beds across all of our sites proved to be an estimable challenge, and required us to pay careful attention to our gardens and their individual demands. The heatwaves of the dry PNW summer were a particularly threatening obstacle that set us back in our initial planting phase by killing many of our young crops before we had installed adequate sun protection. We learned from this mistake and took care to plant seedlings under shade cloth from then on. We relied on our connections to other urban farmers in the region for advice when we could not solve problems on our own, or wanted to take preventative measures. We also used this network for access to material resources such as seeds, tools, and building materials.

- Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

This project gave us the confidence that we can grow good, organic food from seed. Though both of us have worked for various farms and garden operations in the past, this was a chance to test our skills and identify gaps in our knowledge. We know we have a long way to go; this work takes a lifetime to master. It was also very impactful to see the way our project physically transformed the neighborhood landscape. Our infrastructure simply did not exist before this summer, and now our partners have access to raised beds, fertile soil, and community partnerships that will support their future endeavors. Urban space is what you make of it, and it takes courage to alter your surrounding landscape. But it is an essential part of fighting for the world you want to live in. We have realized that there is very real demand for this kind of work in our neighborhood, and throughout Portland. We have demonstrated a possibility for what a systemic re-purposing of empty neighborhood space could look like, towards the end of reducing food insecurity in our community. We now feel that this dream is not only a very real possibility, but simply a matter of fulfilling a naturally arising interest and growing sense of urgency with the appropriate structure and resources.

Personal Statement
"In response to the current and impending violence imposed on ecosystems by industrial agriculture's attempts to constrain ecological complexity and nuance, Patchwork Farms aims to promote decentralized, place-based food systems that listen rather than control. We're trying to put love back into our neighborhood's food system. We've come to see local food systems as an avenue for tangibly realizing and remembering the way we are co-constituted with our environment. When you eat a zucchini from a plant you've attended to for months, preparing its soil, watering it, removing insects from the bottom of its leaves, you're forced to remember the throughlines between yourself and the insects, water, and soil that actively assemble you." —Alec DeContreras