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## **Volunteering at the Methodist Church Community Garden in Isla Vista - A Reflection**



Image taken on March 4th, 2024

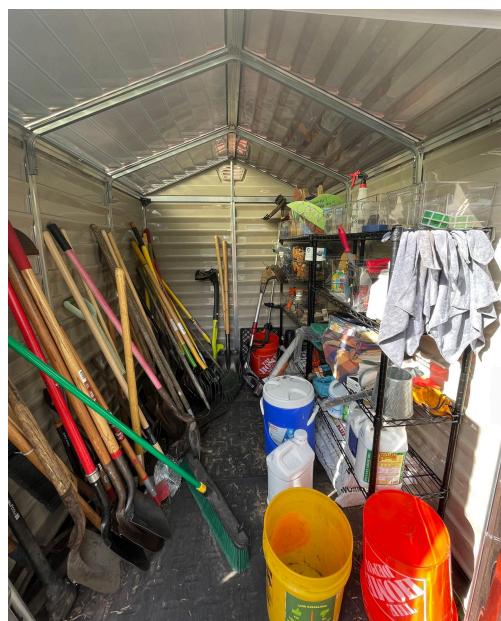
### *What is the Methodist Community Garden?*



3/4/24 Greenhouse with gloves, seedlings, and soil.

The Methodist Church Community Garden is located at 892 Camino Del Sur, Goleta, CA 93117. It was formed through a partnership between the Edible Campus Program, the UUMe congregation, and the Isla Vista Community Services District. The garden's Operations Coordinator, Megan Wirzberger, is a student from the University of California, Santa Barbara and plays a critical role in maintaining the garden. The garden had a grand opening on May 5, 2019, consisting of food, a live band, and workshops about

composting, gardening, and food insecurity (Martinez, 2019). Dozens of people attended, ranging from children, to college students, to the elderly population (Martinez, 2019). The garden was intended to help food-insecure students, providing a space where anyone can stop by and pick fresh-produce. Following the grand opening, the gardens would host weekly volunteer days every Sunday where people could plant and maintain the area (Martinez, 2019), however, upon my volunteering experience this quarter, this was no longer the case. After the 2020 pandemic, talk about the garden dwindled down - it seemed almost forgotten. The Edible Campus Program continues to host volunteer days every Saturday, however, the group jumps from garden to garden within Goleta; there is no group solely focused on the Methodist Garden. Having no previous gardening experience, I was curious to take on this endeavor.



3/10/24 Shed with shovels, plant nutrients, buckets, and signs.

### *Goals and Expectations*



3/10/24 Watering cilantro

Prior to meeting the garden staff, I was expecting to plant, water, and harvest crops throughout the quarter. I had the notion that since people were picking the vegetables often, we had to replant often as well. Additionally, the 149 Food, Agriculture, and Environment lecture would discuss creating new land commons in which struggling communities would form community gardens to build connections and support those facing food insecurity (Carlisle, Food and Capitalism).

In 2020, a report was conducted about the connection

between community gardens and community. 71.0% of the studies were conducted in the United States while the rest were in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and South Africa (Burt, 2020). All of the studies reported that produce was shared within the community and one study reported that participants also shared knowledge, culture, and gardening tools (Burt, 2020). Produce was shared and donated to different members of the community, including other gardeners, family, friends, and food pantries (Burt, 2020). There was a clear increase in social connectedness which resulted in outcomes such as neighborhood clean up, beautification, neighborhood involvement, revitalisation, and neighborhood improvement



2/9/24 First day of volunteering. My hesitation was apparent when I only took one leaf of produce home.

(Burt, 2020). Based on this study and my previous readings, I felt excited to be a part of the community.

I was also curious if any of the crops or ways of harvesting were influenced by Native American practices. Once I was officially a volunteer, Megan Wirzberger gave me a run-down of the daily activities in the garden. There were three basic tasks: watering, weeding, and mulching. Watering and mulching were the simplest. Each garden bed needed about four minutes of watering to let the water soak through while mulching only required adding mulch to the pathways and in the garden beds. Though weeding sounded simple, I realized I didn't really know what the different types of weeds looked like. I was also hesitant to harvest crops for myself due to lack of gardening knowledge. It made me wonder if the hesitation I was feeling to engage with these crops was felt by the community around me as well.

### *The Beginning*

Volunteering was done on one's own time, stopping by the garden whenever most convenient.

There was never a schedule and working alongside other volunteers was purely up to chance. For this reason, my first day volunteering was spent alone. I had been given the basic rundown by Megan, however I was still unsure on how to properly weed or properly harvest.

Nonetheless, I worked with the knowledge

I had. Within the first few minutes of my volunteering experience, I came upon my first take-away.



3/4/24 Gloves from the greenhouse



3/7/24 Watering and weeding on a windy day

## 1: Gardening is Chaotic

My first day volunteering included getting familiar with the location of the supplies, unlocking the equipment, and most importantly, trial and error. The locks were old and rusted and I had difficulty getting them open. Once I unlocked the greenhouse, I picked out a pair of gloves for weeding.

Stepping into the greenhouse was an adventure. The area was covered in dirt and spiderwebs and when looking through the gloves, there was a spider perched on one of the hands, camouflaging with the gray. Since that day, I would thoroughly investigate each glove for arachnids or other bugs. When people describe gardening, it is assumed to be a peaceful, relaxing process. We can be in tune with nature, enjoy fresh food free of pesticides, spend time outdoors, and enjoy the sunny weather, especially in a place like California. However, for someone like myself who was born and raised in urban and suburban areas, gardens are somewhat of a foreign and stressful subject. The process was dirty, messy, and I was constantly running into bugs and ants within the garden. The first day was the most difficult, but after the first few hours, I felt much more comfortable with the gardening process. Despite the mess, it felt good to spend a few hours outdoors. To completely immerse myself in the environment, I refrained from wearing headphones to pay attention to the sounds and sights around me.



2/20/24 Collection of weeds picked out



3/7/24 Pathway before weed removal



3/7/24 Pathway after weed removal

The community garden had a total of five volunteers including Megan and myself, so there was always work to be done with such a limited staff. With five volunteers, I assumed that I would run into the group occasionally, especially since my hours were spaced out erratically. The garden website seemed to pride itself on its adoration for its volunteers, however I found myself in a very different situation. This has led me to my second take-away.

## **2: Gardening is Lonely.**

At first, I gave the community garden the benefit of the doubt. The social aspect of community gardening is crucial; what is a community garden without community? After all, there were studies across the world that highlighted the relationship between community gardens and their participants. A Canadian survey on gardens explained how participants expressed satisfaction at their involvement and a feeling of empowerment by improving their skills (Al-Delaimy et al., 2017). Young people in schools have shown increased student engagement and confidence among those participating, and there were reported levels of enjoyment when it came to working

together to achieve a beautiful environment (Al-Delaimy et al., 2017). Participating in community gardens is more often than not connected to increased trust, civic engagement, leadership, and social connections that help in community building (Al-Delaimy et al., 2017). That is why when I arrived for my first day of volunteering and no one was in sight, I figured it was a fluke. It wasn't until the third or fourth hour of volunteering that I realized this was a major flaw in the garden. Not only was there a lack of companionship and collaboration, there were also a lack of visitors to the garden. Out of the ten hours I spent volunteering, only one hour was spent with the garden coordinator, Megan. Out of all the days I went to the garden, I only had one visitor who was a student interested in volunteering. This realization was shocking. Food insecurity is rampant in the Isla Vista community, so it wasn't as if there was no need for the garden. It seemed people were unaware of the garden due to lack of advertising. There were no signs welcoming people to stop by nor were there instructions on how to pick crops or signs highlighting crops ready to be harvested. It was always silent in the area without anyone to talk to or anyone to share the crops with. It was a troubling realization.



### **3: Even In A Place With Food Insecurity, Gardens Are Not Guaranteed To Help**

At UCSB 48% of undergraduate students and 31% of graduate students face food insecurity, meaning they do not have reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. Community Gardens would seem like a logical, effective response. However, due to the lack of advertising and attention, the garden goes unnoticed. When speaking to my peers and friends about my project, I did not meet a single person who was aware of the Methodist Church Garden. The lack of involvement leads a lot of the vegetables to overgrow and spoil. Several of the plants are past their picking, and although the crops are available, they do not appear as appetizing. Not only does the food go to waste, but it also becomes a waste of time and resources. Volunteers are spending their time mending to a garden untouched by the public while the water, soil, and tools used to upkeep the garden are going to waste. The absence of education regarding gardening practices also contributes to the lack of participation. For someone like myself who was aware of the garden and its purpose, I was very

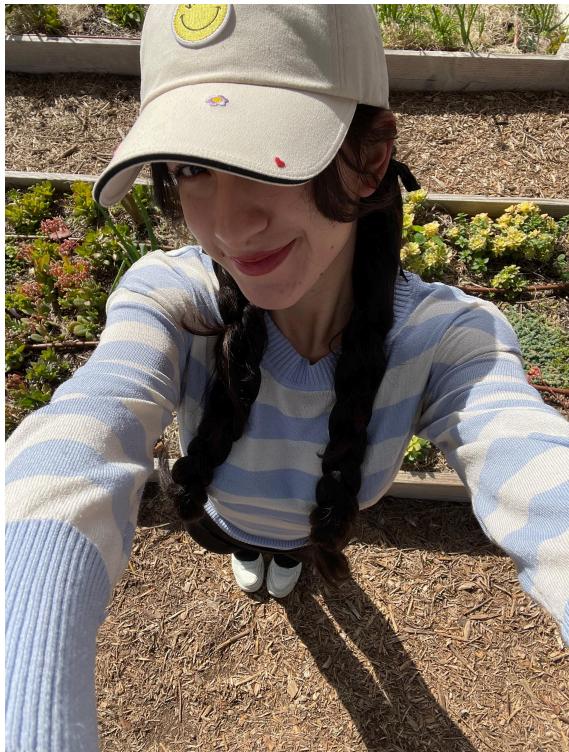


3/7/24 Overgrown cabbage

interested in harvesting vegetables for myself, but because I was unaware of the proper way to harvest the different foods, I was very hesitant to participate. Ideally, gardeners help maintain paths, compost, toolsheds, and other shared space and materials. When gardeners do not participate regularly, public engagement lowers and can contribute to the spread of weeds, pests, and diseases (Drake et al., 2015). Community gardens often encourage participation through education and social events, asking members to contribute to shared work at various intervals,

for instance, weekly, monthly, or seasonally. Volunteer labor is crucial for maintaining large amounts of green waste that can accumulate (Drake et al., 2015).

### *The Final Week Volunteering*



3/10/24 Last day volunteering

Despite the ups-and-downs of my volunteering experience, I was ultimately grateful for the chance to participate in community gardening. I always thought that community gardens were perfect solutions to food insecurity, however I now realize how important it is to meticulously plan every aspect of creating large projects in order for them to truly be successful and engaging. In the future, I hope to see more participation and advertisement for the garden.

### **4: Community is Key**

The most glaring take-away was the importance of community. Community and engagement are the lifeline of community gardens, fostering connection, empowerment, and sustainability. These gardens serve as places where people should come together, share knowledge, resources, and experiences. This collective strengthens the community and enhances the garden's productivity. Through active participation and collaboration, community members not only walk away



3/7/24 Unpicked, overgrown cabbage

with fresh produce, but also with new relationships, skills, and a shared sense of purpose.

Without community, none of this is possible.

## 5: Room For Improvement is Endless

Improving community gardens through increased advertisement and signage can enhance engagement and overall participation. Large banners advertising the availability of freshly picked vegetables can attract attention from local residents and those passing by. We can also place clear signs throughout the garden indicating which plants are ready for harvest and small signs explaining how to harvest each crop. Through social media platforms, local newsletters, and community bulletin boards, we can advertise the garden's offerings to reach those unaware of its accessibility. For instance, the New Brunswick Community Garden Coalition creates engagement by hosting workshops and events that bring together gardeners from across the city (Drake et al., 2015). Garden managers also host harvest potlucks and seed swaps. In New Jersey, members invite non-gardening neighbors for social events and donate surplus food to nearby community centers or food pantries (Drake et al., 2015). Other actions include: putting surplus food in "donation coolers," setting up a table outside the garden for those passing by to take fresh food, and fundraising in front of the garden (Drake et al., 2015).



3/7/24 Harvest signs on ready-to-be-picked vegetables

### *Ideas Challenged*

My experience challenged the idea that community gardens are inherently successful in battling food insecurity and fostering social connections. While these gardens undoubtedly offer valuable

opportunities, they are not possible to attain without engagement. Additionally, the idea that community gardens utilize Native American crops or harvesting practices was debunked - those practices are only seen in gardens run by those of Native American heritage. Additionally, I feel that it is easy to forget the impact these gardens face with climate change. Climate change can affect the composition and diversity of urban gardens due to extreme climate conditions, extended periods of high heat, drought and limited water (Tomatis et al., 2023). Changes in temperature and water patterns can also cause an increase in pests, weeds, disease, and invasive species (Tomatis et al., 2023). To improve water use efficiency, we can collect and store rainwater, reduce water use, improve holding capacity of soil water, and adopt drought resilient plants (Tomatis et al., 2023). There is even an argument that community gardens run by the government fall under neoliberalism which eliminates price controls, deregulates capital markets, and lowers trade barriers (Drake, 2014). For this reason, we should place an emphasis on having these gardens run by grassroots organizations and nonprofits (Drake, 2014).

#### *Further Learning and Development*

Throughout this experience with the food system, I have come to realize the crucial importance of diving into the downsides of potential solutions. While it's easy to get caught up in the positives of these types of innovative ideas to solve food insecurity and create a greener, more sustainable community, we need a closer examination of the potential risk. Solutions are often presented with surface-level risks. It's easy to believe that a particular solution is capable of solving all our problems, however, reality is never that easy. That's why I've made it my goal to get involved directly with these solutions, to see for myself what we're really dealing with. By immersing myself in the process, I can gain firsthand insights into the challenges and limitations that may not be immediately apparent on paper. This hands-on approach allows me to find areas for improvement and identify potential consequences. It's through this process of exploration and

discovery that we can truly make meaningful progress towards a more resilient and equitable food system for all.

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