

## **THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY GARDENS AND THEIR POTENTIAL TO CREATE LINKS BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL COMMUNITIES**

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Community gardens contribute a range of significant benefits to human health. They also provide community-wide health benefits, as well as positive environmental and economic outcomes. Community gardens are particularly prevalent in developing countries, typically in the form of small-scale gardening for food (McMichael 2000). However, they are gaining popularity in developed nations like Australia. This paper reviews the benefits of community gardens to human health on both the individual and community level, and discusses whether they can contribute towards bridging the rural-urban social gap.

Exposure to 'green space' or 'nature' has a positive effect on health and well-being, with benefits including: reduced stress levels, blood pressure and heart rate; improved recovery from surgery; enhanced sense of well-being; and promotion of social interaction (Relf 1992; Lewis 1995; Frumkin 2001; Soderback, Soderstrom et al. 2004; Elings 2006; Groenewegen, van den Berg et al. 2006). Improved access and intake of fresh and nutritious food may also result from participation in community gardens (Patel 1991; Twiss, Dickinson et al. 2003; Gustafson, Cavallo et al. 2007) and after-school gardening programs (Hermann, Parker et al. 2006). Gardening is a significant physical activity (Dannenberg, Keller et al. 1989; Ford, Merritt et al. 1991), which reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease (Haapanen, Miilunpalo et al. 1996). It has also been reported that gardening can contribute to the maintenance of health and well-being particularly amongst elderly people (Milligan, Gatrell et al. 2004). Gardeners themselves perceive the health benefits of community gardens, citing improved nutrition, access to food, increased mental health and physical activity (Waliczek, Zajicek et al. 2005; Wakefield, Yeudall et al. 2007).

Community gardens also provide benefits to the broader community. These include the building of stronger, more cohesive communities, development of support networks, reduced levels of violence, and increased levels of community pride (Relf 1992; Sullivan and Kuo 1996; Armstrong 2000). Furthermore, such gardens provide access to nature, which is known to increase neighbourhood satisfaction (Relf 1992). Community gardens, as a form of urban agriculture, can also create opportunities for leadership development and community organising, therefore contributing to the development of social capital (Brown and Jameton 2000). WinklerPrins (2004) goes further and provides evidence that community gardens can provide an important means of sustaining critical social networks between urban and rural communities. Similarly, support and tolerance of agriculture is stronger when non-farmers report the existence of social capital with farmers (Sharp and Smith 2003).

Can community gardens therefore provide even wider benefits by bridging the divide between urban and rural communities in Australia? The recent proliferation of community gardens, combined with growing interest in ‘food miles’, locally-grown food, and other concepts around the amelioration of climate change impacts, indicate that they do.

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