

Sowing Seeds in the City

Urban Gardening Communities in British Columbia

By:

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Introduction:

Our initial objective with this project was to work collaboratively with Heather Pritchard, the Executive Director at FarmFolk/CityFolk, to collect “urban seed histories” from local B.C. farmers. FarmFolk/CityFolk is a non-profit organization that is committed to establishing sustainable and nutritional food-growing practices both within and around the greater Vancouver area. In keeping with their overall mission, the people at FarmFolk/CityFolk developed a research project that would attempt to gather stories and insights from urban gardeners who had adapted their (non-indigenous) seeds to Vancouver’s moist climate. More specifically, Ms. Pritchard expressed an interest in learning from agriculturalists who had immigrated to Canada at some point in their lives, and brought seeds or plants from their native countries to grow here in British Columbia. Through Dr. Charles Menzies, we, Illana Hester and Michaela Varisto, were recruited to conduct a collaborative study with FarmFolk/CityFolk that would attempt to supplement the organization’s understanding of seed saving, seed sharing, and sustainable seed sowing in an urban setting, by interviewing local growers. As two anthropology students, we were also interested in examining the socio-cultural implications of communally sharing and farming plants that are representative of individuals’ distinct cultural experiences and knowledge. In other words, we wanted to know if and how peoples’ seeds reflected their own personal histories.

As our project unfolded, we quickly realized that the imposed time restrictions—one 15-week term—were going to influence not only the direction our

research would take, but also the amount of actual information that we would be able to gather. At our first meeting with Heather at the FarmFolk/CityFolk offices, we were asked to make contact with local, non-Canadian born gardeners to interview about their (“traditional”) growing practices. However, the gardeners that Heather had in mind were not directly affiliated with FarmFolk/CityFolk; and in order to speak with them *and* follow ethical guidelines, we would have had to compose a separate set of consent forms prior to interviewing them. Given the brevity of the course, this was something that we simply did not have the time to do. Moreover, the gardeners did not wish us to share any interview transcripts or general information with FarmFolk/CityFolk, which we felt would undermine the “collaborative” aspect of our project. Due to these developments, our original research plan had to be sidelined.

Thanks to a follow-up tip from Heather, we found out about an annual Vancouver event called Seedy Saturday, wherein B.C. farmers and agriculturalists come together to discuss and sell their own seeds. At the event, we spoke to four representatives who from farms across British Columbia about their seed collecting, saving, and growing practices. All of the growers we spoke to were Canadian born; however, they are frequently in contact with people from all over the world, trading and obtaining seeds that are not typically found in or around Vancouver. Upon hearing their individual stories, we decided that an anthropological consideration of the seed-sharing communities that socio-politically unite farmers and gardeners would be the most obvious direction for our research to take.

Research Procedures & Methodologies:

ILLANA'S PART

Key Findings:

ILLANA'S PART

Project Evaluation:

As was mentioned in the introduction, the time constraints surrounding this research project had the most profound affect on our actual findings – that is, what and how much information we were ultimately able to ‘unearth.’ In retrospect, we spent too many weeks attempting to make contact with and interview the Mayan gardeners. Our initial thought was that their affiliation with UBC Farm would make meeting with them relatively easy. However, we soon learned that those members of UBC’s faculty who knew the gardeners did not have the ethical clearance to give out their contact information. With the help of a classmate, we were eventually able to get in touch with them, yet it took over a week for them to decide whether speaking to us would (1) benefit their community, and (2) fit into their busy schedules. In the end, and as was mentioned in the introduction of this report, the Mayan gardeners decided that they would only agree to be interviewed if we would promise not to share our interview transcripts with any other parties. Knowing that such an agreement would undercut our partnership with FarmFolk/CityFolk, we declined their offer and ended up once again at the beginning. However, by that time there were only a few weeks left to ‘complete’ our project.

Because the bulk of Heather Pritchard's months are spent out of town, (managing a sustainable farm that lies an hour north of Vancouver), nearly all of our follow-up discussions with her had to be conducted via e-mail. This resulted in a slow turn around time in the exchanging of information. When Heather eventually did receive the news of our cancelled meeting with the Mayan gardeners, there were few feasible research possibilities left for us to pursue. We had a project deadline looming and Heather had her own responsibilities outside of Vancouver. Setting us up with an interview with one of her own contacts would have taken weeks, and by then the spring semester would have been over.

In hindsight, it would have been advantageous for us to have interviewed Heather's contacts—i.e. urban gardeners affiliated with FarmFolk/CityFolk—in the first place; 'outsourcing' our informants both threatened the collaborative aspect of our project and lead to ethical roadblocks that we had neither the time or the resources to grapple with. Fortunately, Heather was extremely understanding of our missteps, and encouraged us to pursue our research from an entirely different angle. And even though her organization stood to benefit little from our research, she was enthusiastic about us investigating other agricultural issues.

Our project's saving grace was Seedy Saturday, an event that Heather informed us about during our first meeting at the FarmFolk/CityFolk housing co-op. The event, which took place at VanDusen Botanical Gardens, provided us with a final opportunity to speak directly to local seed-savers and BC organic farmers. Granted, our interviews were informally conducted and relatively brief, but all the growers that we spoke to provided us with unique insights about the dynamics of

seed sharing, the politics behind organic farming, and the necessity of sustainable agricultural practices. Thanks to their input, and their willingness to share their knowledge, we were able to establish a starting point from which to further investigate seed-sharing communities. Their voices were the primary strength of this project, and without them there would be no final product.

Considering the limited amount of data that we were able to collect, further examination of the issues raised in this report are certainly warranted. Given more time, we would develop a more comprehensive set of interview questions and seek out several more local farmers and gardeners with whom to speak. It would also be beneficial to do follow-up interviews with the growers that we interviewed at Seedy Saturday, and ask them more specific questions about their personal motivations for practicing sustainable farming, and – by extension – seed sharing and saving.

Each of the individuals that we spoke to at Seedy Saturday had different reasons for collecting seeds and harvesting them in British Columbia. Because of these various reasons, each person also had different concerns about the restrictions placed on Canadian agriculturalists in general. Where some had encountered problems with just bringing certain seeds into Canada, others had difficulties getting their plants certified as organic. In negotiating Canadian Customs' restrictions and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's (AAFC) guidelines, each independent grower faces individual challenges – from the 'simple' acquisition of their seeds, all the way to the marketing and selling of their produce. As anthropologists, we think it would be worthwhile to further investigate how the governmental restrictions placed on organic farmers and gardeners compel them to form seed (and information) sharing

communities that span countries and bridge continents. With the assorted bits of information that we gathered as a starting point, future researchers could conduct a more in-depth analysis of these issues, and perhaps acquire enough information to draw some broad-based conclusions. In short, virtually any further research would serve to fill in the gaps that are present in this report.

Conclusion:

Despite the limited amount of ‘data’ that we were able to gather, we choose to look at this project as having been a valuable learning experience, for it revealed to us—on a minor scale—the kind of obstacles that a social scientist typically faces when undergoing new research. As undergraduates, who had never undertaken such a project, it was humbling to