

"It's growing food but it's also growing community."

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATING IN A COMMUNITY GARDEN

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Background: The Lismore Community Garden (LCG) became a reality in late 2009 with funding from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. Its aims were to improve community nutrition practices, increase knowledge on healthy eating and health, strengthen community connectedness and create education and employment opportunities. Other objectives included the demonstration of organic gardening practices and the establishment of backyard and neighbourhood gardens. The LCG is now being independently managed by the Rainbow Region Community Farms Inc., a not for profit organisation run by volunteers.

Aim: The main purpose of this research study was to understand the perceived effects of participating in the garden in terms of health and nutrition, social connectedness and food access. It also aimed to determine the motives which inspired the gardeners to join the garden.

Method: This study utilised the semi-structured interview method of inquiry and observation of garden activities. Interviews were conducted between March and May 2010. Interview transcripts were analysed and coded for key themes.

Findings: Eleven garden volunteers were recruited and interviewed, seven of whom were males and four were females, whose ages ranged from 27 to 66 years old. Five recurrent themes were identified from the interviews, including: 1) *Growing the garden takes time*; 2) *The garden stimulates sharing and reciprocity*; 3) *Learning occurs in the garden*; 4) *The garden has a number of positive effects*; and 5) *The garden is an oasis*.

Conclusion: The garden impacted differently on the study participants. Some already developed new friendships and others were still making new ones. Some participants were using the garden produce; others thought that the garden was not producing enough to take home. Others considered the garden as a venue for sharing backyard produce. Some thought the garden fulfilled a social purpose for them while for others; the gardening took precedence over the social activities. Despite these different perceptions, all agreed that the Garden was a positive experience for them. This study demonstrated that the LCG is a useful avenue for building community and for reinforcing principles of sustainable environments.

Implications for practice: This study has demonstrated that the LCG is working towards the building and strengthening of the social fabric of the community. It can also become the hub of non-gardening activities for the community, activities that could form the core of community cohesion whilst fostering positive physical and mental health.

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Maryann has been working in Health Promotion in Australia for more than 17 years. Armed with a Bachelor Degree in the Social Sciences, a Masters in Education, and more than 10 years of experience in policy and community development in the health arena, she migrated from the Philippines to Australia in 1993. Maryann is passionate about supporting community-based initiatives that help build social inclusion and inclusiveness.



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