

Engaging audiences on food through urban farming: *the human-social connection*

By Joel Williams

From its historical purpose as a means to ease food insecurities; particularly during times of hardship, today, the functions and goals of urban food growing are many and varied. In fact, the list is rather impressive – it works as an educational tool and community builder, develops employability skills, bolsters youth development, increases food literacy, strengthens citizen engagement, fosters a wider environmental activism, enhances physical and mental health and works toward improving diet and overall public health. Urban gardening can also foster important human-social relationships including promoting ethnic and cultural integration in communities, cross generational cohesion and lastly, it aids meeting new people and friendship forming. This article will focus particularly on the social aspects of food growing and drawing from one particular case study within a university setting, will look at how these social interactions can be leveraged for greater impact toward creating connections through food and broader sustainability awareness.

Growhampton is a sustainability project within the University of Roehampton in South-West London. With a core focus on food, it aims to embed sustainability in the everyday lives of students, staff and local community on campus and beyond. The project comprises of growing spaces and a polytunnel for the production of horticultural crops, two small apple orchards (one of which is ~100 years old), a flock of 10 chickens, rooftop bee hives, historic grounds for foraging, a weekly market stall, a sustainability café and regular educational and volunteering opportunities for students to engage with the project. All of these aspects come together as one interlinked ‘edible campus’ initiative which is scattered across the 53 acre site.

The volunteering and educational opportunities that are provided through the edible campus are many and varied and range from solitary, autonomous roles through to larger, more social group activities. ‘Learn to Grow’ is a weekly, practical gardening session where students perform horticultural related duties (seed sowing, composting, plant management etc.). These sessions are semi-structured to the seasons and specifically designed to be hands-on whereby students roll up their sleeves, simply give it a go and ‘learn through doing’ – an integral strategy of all the volunteering opportunities provided. A broad range of different vegetables are cultivated; however, the project particularly spe-

Pictures courtesy of Joel Williams and Growhampton



cialises in leafy greens produced using cut and come again production techniques. This allows not only a regular supply of weekly greens, but also regular volunteering opportunities for students to attend – this continuity being key to building up the friendships and social relations. In addition to these practical gardening activities, an additional weekly volunteering session also operates to harvest the vegetables that are produced. ‘Market Day’ begins with a harvest morning, which again is a communal activity that brings students together to pick, prepare and pack the vegetables that are ready to be harvested. Here different blends of leafy greens are mixed together for either raw salad consumption or cooking mixes, as well as other vegetables that are in season. Immediately after each harvest morning, the weekly farmers’ market stall operates out front of The Hive Café (the projects’ sustainability café) during the lunch hour whereby customers comprising of students, staff and community can purchase the vegetables that were picked that morning. The farmers market, taking place alongside The Hive Café has been an integral tool in creating a social space for participants and customers to mingle, have lunch and pick up their weekly greens.

‘Learn to Cook’ is a more recent addition to the volunteering repertoire whereby participants have the opportunity to utilise ingredients from the edible campus

(either cultivated or foraged) to produce a range of value added foods such as fruit and flower cordial, pesto, chutney, ketchup, infused olive oils, salsa or freshly squeezed apple juice. Students have launched their own label ‘This is our Jam’ which their products are branded under. Growthampton also collaborates with another local community group on a food education programme for school children. Primary and secondary school pupils are taught outdoor, survival and food growing skills designed to engage them with nature and conservation. Education students undergoing teacher training at the University of Roehampton can volunteer with this programme to help run the sessions and obtain unique work experiences teaching in an outdoor learning environment.

A range of other social volunteering sessions and activities also run with the seasons – craft making, repair work, foraging, eco-Christmas decorations made from natural materials gathered on campus, collection and reuse schemes for students moving out of halls and live music, spoken word and games nights in the café. These are all geared toward building community and in many instances fostering a greater sense of environmentalism. There are also a few solitary opportunities to engage with the project including taking care of the chickens (releasing the hens from their overnight coop into a grassed enclosure, changing feed and water, sweeping out the coop and finally, putting the hens



back into the coop later that afternoon) and a watering schedule that some students choose to relax and perform alone. I should note at this point, the university does not offer any agricultural or horticultural modules or formal education in food growing – consequently, the extracurricular volunteering opportunities bring together a rich mix of academic backgrounds (business, arts, science, education etc) into a wonderful interdisciplinary environment. Here, students ‘learn through doing’ and a practical exposure of sustainability concepts being embedded into the everyday nature of the activities becomes evident.

Growing projects much like Growhampton have sprung up within schools, colleges and universities in recent times. Although a majority effort seems to be concentrated toward pupils at school age, young adults within a university landscape also offer an interesting mix of challenges and potential for a more rapid behaviour change. Of course, there is opportunity to embed an engrained and intrinsic, long lasting influence on young children; however, this takes time and there is always the possibility they may reject this valuable learning during their rebellious adolescent years. Didn’t we all love to do the exact opposite of what we were told then? Young adults however, now past this phase and moving into higher education are often living away from home for the first time in their lives and willingly coming to a place of learning. They are there to open their minds, not only to new knowledge through their curriculum, but also to the ways of the wider world and how to be responsible citizens. This is a critical transitional life stage and hence presents an opportunity for intervention, to lead by example and to demonstrate the kind of society in which we want to create. As students graduate and move out into the world, they have the potential to take their newly learned behaviours and experiences with them into their future employment, into their future families and into all of their socio-cultural experiences. Hence there is a significant – yet perhaps more importantly – a rapid potential for these young adults to be major change agents into society as they graduate and move on, taking new learned behaviours and integrating and normalising them into everyday life.

Each year, a feedback survey is carried out to gather students’ thoughts and opinions on their volunteering involvement. Of course, this is a useful tool to help refine and aid the types of activities that are developed. But it also helps to understand students’ motivations for joining the project, why they volunteer and what they hope to get out of their time. One particular trend that has become evident (and not uncommon in other gardening projects) is that the key, driving motivation for joining, is the social interactions – meeting new people and making friends. Many participants may not particularly have an interest in food, food growing or environmentalism but simply join for these social interactions. That said however, survey feedback also shows that many students subsequently take an interest in food and sustainability as a secondary by-product from their volunteering efforts. Hence, the social interactions are viewed as an important bridge toward wider environmental education and thus it becomes important to create memorable and positive social experiences that can attract in new and ongoing volunteers.

Any positive experience is far more likely to be repeated and with this in mind, Growhampton strive to make all volunteering sessions fun and enjoyable. Additional social activities for participants are also organised – dinner parties, nights under the stars around fire, orchard parties, field trips and excursions to lectures/networking events etc. This particular case study highlights the importance of understanding participant motivations and how a fun and socially stimulating programme of events can be a useful tool toward increasing engagement. No matter their individual goals and objectives, other urban farming projects can potentially apply this ‘social bridge’ strategy toward achieving their desired outcomes. In doing so, they may be more effective at achieving a broader and further reaching impact through urban food growing.

Feel free to follow Growhampton’s story on social media – just search for them on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Joel Williams is a soil scientist and former trustee of the Biodynamic Association.

