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## *Educating Future Generations of Community Gardeners*

### *A Deweyan Challenge*

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I formulate a Deweyan argument for school gardening that prepares students for a specific type of gardening activism: community gardening, or the political activity of collectively organizing, planting and tending gardens for the purposes of food security, education and community development. Though not identical, a related type of gardening activism, guerrilla gardening, or the political activity of reclaiming unused urban land, sometimes illegally, for purposes of cultivation and beautification, is also implicated. Historically, community gardening in the U.S. has been associated with relief projects during periods of economic downturn and crisis, urban blight and gentrification, as well as nationalism, nativism and racism. Despite these last few unfortunate associations, the American philosopher John Dewey detached school gardening from the nativist's tool-kit, portraying it as a gateway to more enriching adult experiences, not as a technique for assimilating immigrant children to a distinctly American way of life. One of those experiences that school gardening can prepare children for is environmental political activism, particularly involvement in gardening movements. Dewey did not mention this collateral benefit. Nevertheless, an argument can be made that garden advocacy—or, more specifically, participation in politically-motivated gardening movements—is an acceptable interpretation, or elaboration, of what Dewey meant by “a civic turn” to school gardening.



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Starting with the interest and effort of the children, the whole community has become tremendously interested in starting gardens, using every bit of available ground. The district is a poor one and, besides transforming the yards, the gardens have been a real economic help to the people.

—John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey<sup>1</sup>

I do not wait for permission to become a gardener but dig wherever I see horticultural potential. I do not just tend existing gardens but create them from neglected space. I, and thousands of people like me, step out from home to garden land we do not own. We see opportunities all around us. Vacant lots flourish as urban oases, roadside verges dazzle with flowers and crops are harvested from land that we assumed to be fruitless. In all their forms these have become known as guerilla gardeners.

—Richard Reynolds<sup>2</sup>

### Philosophy and Garden Politics

Why would the early twentieth-century's pragmatist philosopher—once described by the *New York Times* as “America's philosopher”—be the missing link between gardening education and activism? Until recently, most philosophers have shown little scholarly interest in the activity of gardening.<sup>3</sup> “In neglecting the garden,” David Cooper (2006) infers, “philosophy is . . . ignoring not merely a current fashion, but activities and experiences of abiding human significance” (p. 2). Nevertheless, important philosophical questions abound: What is a garden? What are the motivations for gardening? Does cultivating a garden lend itself to cultivating specific virtues? Is gardening a form art and, if so, what kind? When philosophers have explored the significance of gardening, more philosophical energy has been devoted to the artistic, rather than the political, dimension of gardening.<sup>4</sup>

One philosopher who connects politics and gardening is Isis Brook. She highlights the activity's value as “an essential component of human well-being” and as an outlet for children to renew contact with nature (Brook 2010a, p. 298; 2010b, pp. 13-25). Brook also sees gardening as an opportunity for children to be liberated, if just temporarily, from adult supervision, to allow their imagination to range freely and for them to face anxieties about not realizing their full potential (Brook 2010a, 304-5).<sup>5</sup> Her account of guerilla gardening offers some insight into why it would be attractive to urban youth:

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, J. (1996, MW 8:269). Citations to the *Collected Works of John Dewey* follow the conventional method, LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or EW (Early Works), volume: page number. For example, MW 9:221 refers to the Middle Works, volume 9, page 221.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, R. (2008). *On Guerilla Gardening* (pp. 14-16).

<sup>3</sup> Gardens have also received little serious treatment by environmental historians. According to K. Helphand (1999), a “look at the literature of environmental history reveals that in this burgeoning realm, virtually all speak of landscape, but few speak of that most special and concentrated landscape, the garden” (p. 139).

<sup>4</sup> In *A Philosophy of Gardens*, Cooper (2006) insists that despite this disproportionate attention, “the significance of the garden cannot be restricted to the domain of the aesthetic” (p. 4). Some works on gardening by philosophers that do not focus solely on the aesthetic dimension include King (2003), Scott (2010) and Weston (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Brook (2010a) notes that in Gerald Durrell's *Corfu Trilogy* four features of the child's experience of nature—  
(Continues on next page.)

Politically this [movement] has its roots in the same soil as the community gardening movement which began in the 1970s. The new style acts of guerrilla gardening are usually small and take place in built up areas to try to bring something of nature into the space. This could be through planting up road verges or traffic islands. The planting is done surreptitiously and often a mini garden is established and appreciated before anyone with authority over the land notices. Even sites where there is no access have been turned into havens of wildflowers by creating seed grenade with water filled ballons or Christmas baubles packed with seeds and fertilizer, or the more ecologically respectable seed bombs of moulded compost and plant seeds (p. 308).

Though the idea that school gardening is a gateway to guerilla gardening appears nowhere in Brook's essay, the reader cannot help but notice continuities between those features of a child's nature experience that make adult life more fulfilling and the spirit of environmental activism. So it can be inferred that while the gardening habit evokes wonder, freedom, patience and action in the child, it also has the potential, especially in adulthood, to translate into politically transformative action.

So, why is John Dewey so important for appreciating school gardening as a gateway to community gardening and gardening activism? Dewey's reputation as a prominent philosopher of education is well established.<sup>6</sup> Although he recommended school gardening (and it was part of the curriculum at the Dewey's Experimental School at the University of Chicago), Dewey's credentials as a philosopher of gardening are not as well known. To appreciate Dewey's writings on school and community gardening, it helps to contextualize them, particularly relative to the historical milieu of the Progressive Era, and an educational movement to bring the study of natural history into the primary and secondary schools. It is to this task that the inquiry presently turns.

### **Nature Study and School Gardens**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, policy-makers, educators and philosophers, including Dewey, sought to bring the careful observation and study of nature to primary and secondary school classrooms as part of the nature study movement.<sup>7</sup> The reasoning was that if in childhood people developed a genuine interest in the natural world, both a sentimental fascination and a scientific curiosity, then as they grew older they would almost inevitably seek to preserve their environment (Armitage 2009, p. 115). "Work in nature study is undergoing reorganization," Dewey (1996) wrote, "so that pupils shall actually get a feeling for

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time ("very focused attention for long periods to observe the minutia of life"), wonder (fascination with "how all of nature fits together"), action ("a kind of engaged looking we could call experimenting") and freedom (the "ability to just let him [the nature explorer] be")—operate as metaphorical gateways to enriched adult experiences (pp. 296-298).

<sup>6</sup> Dewey's landmark works on educational philosophy are *Democracy and Education*, *Education and Experience*, *The School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum*. For a sample of works on Dewey's philosophy of education, see Fairfield (2009), Garrison (1997, 1998), Johnston (2006, 2009) and Ralston (2008, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Robin G. Shulze (2003) captures the spirit of the nature study movement: "In the Progressive era in America ... Nature Study took on a new life as a means of vital educational and national reform. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American school children planted and tended gardens, watched polliwogs develop into frogs, tamed and bred animals, and learned to identify trees. They were encouraged, both boys and girls, to get their hands dirty" (p. 474). For seminal statements of the nature study approach, see Comstock (1939), Coulter (1896) and Jordan (1896).

plants and animals, together with some real scientific knowledge, not simply the rather sentimental descriptions and rhapsodizing of literature” (MW 8:266).<sup>8</sup>

One of the nature study movement’s founders, Liberty Hyde Bailey (1901), noted that the difference between the “nature desire” and the “garden desire” is that the former is “perpetual and constant,” while the latter reemerges “with every new springtime” (p. 267). For Dewey, though, nature study was virtually synonymous with partaking in occupations out-of-doors, one of which is gardening. Not only does gardening permit students to, on the scientific side, test soil to assess how best to conserve water in arid climates<sup>9</sup> or, on the practical side, to grow their own food, but it also empowers them to come into closer contact with their natural surroundings. For city dwellers, separated as they are from the flora and fauna of the countryside, renewing this vital relationship with the environment, especially unseen sources of food, is especially important. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1996) remarked on how involvement in school gardening becomes a gateway to urban community gardening: “The vegetable garden is the obvious starting point [to community gardening] for most city children; if they do not have tiny gardens in their own backyards, there is a neighbor who has, or they are interested to find out where the vegetables they eat come from and how they are grown” (MW 8:268).

For Dewey, gardening channels students’ native interests in all things living into a genuine appreciation of, and even a scientific curiosity about, their environment. “No number of object-lessons, got up as object-lessons for the sake of giving information,” Dewey (1996) insisted, “can afford even the shadow for a substitute for acquaintance with the plants and animals of the farm and garden acquired through actual living among them and caring for them” (MW 1:8). Learning about seasonal growing periods, soil chemistry and methods of cultivation could be a practical entry-point into more sophisticated studies, a way of inspiring greater theoretical interest in the biological, environmental and even the *social* sciences. “Instead of the [technical] subject matter belonging to a peculiar study called botany,” Dewey (1996) wrote, “it [gardening] will then belong to life, and will find, moreover, its natural correlations with the facts of soil, animal life, and human relations” (MW 9:208). Dewey also connected gardening to food production and the practical lessons students would learn through cooking their own recently harvested ingredients.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Unlike many of the movement’s founders, Dewey endorsed neither an exclusively sentimental nor an exclusively scientific rationale for studying nature. Some nature study advocates wanted students to develop an emotional attachment to nature solely through a close reading of literary sources, especially poetry. Responding to them, Dewey argued for increased emphasis on the study of nature through scientific method; not to the exclusion of sentimental bonds and literature, but in the interest of greater balance. In *The Landscape of Reform*, Ben Minter (2006) notes that, “Dewey’s enthusiasm for nature study was obviously much more than a case of fanatical science worship” (p. 36). For a range of views on what nature study is, and whether it should endorse scientific or sentimental ends, see Beal et al. (1902). Nature study also shares much in common with the more recent movement for greater environmental literacy. See, for instance, Sideris (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Gardening advocate Benjamin Marshall Davis (1905) demonstrated that soil experiments could be undertaken by school children (pp. 76-77). Nature study pioneer Anna Botsford Comstock (1914) claimed that familiarity with “the kind of soil is the first step to the right treatment of it.” “Nature-Study and the Teaching of Elementary Agriculture” (p. 6).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, at the Cottage School in Riverside, Illinois, Dewey (1996) observed that “the children have a garden where they plant early and late vegetables, so they can use them for their cooking class in the spring and fall; the pupils do all the work here, plant, weed, and gather the things” (MW 8:266).

## **Nativism, Growth and Gardening Politics**

How can Dewey's writings on school gardening motivate educators to teach future generations to be community gardeners? Answering this question demands that we return to what Dewey wrote on the topic of school gardening and its political consequences. One important historical point is that the school gardening and nature study movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were intimately associated with the nativist movement. Nativists believed that immigration to the United States should be eliminated or, barring that possibility, immigrants should undergo intensive assimilation. Historian Adam Rome (2008) documents how this nativist impulse coincided with nature study: "Though a back-to-nature impulse was a defining characteristic of the Progressive Era, the complaints about immigrants demonstrate that some forms of closeness to nature made many Americans deeply uncomfortable" (p. 434). In many cases, nature study was justified as one technique for assimilating new immigrants to a distinctly American way of interacting with nature, a way that emphasized detachment, observation and appreciation, not Old World practices of pothunting, peasantry and peddling.<sup>11</sup>

While Dewey appreciated gardening and nature study as a tool to promote personal and collective growth, even virtue,<sup>12</sup> he was no friend of the nativists. The political dimension of his writings on school gardening emerges most noticeably in his argument that nature study and school gardens leverage the creation of community gardens: "[G]ardens being used as the basis for the nature study work . . . is given a civic turn . . . [when] the value of the gardens to the child and to the neighborhood is demonstrated: to the child as a means of making money or helping his family by supplying them with vegetables, to the community in showing how gardens are means of cleaning up and beautifying the neighborhood" (Dewey 1996, MW 8:269). Children immersed in school garden projects are better equipped to persuade adults that community gardening has immense practical, economic and aesthetic value. Reporting on one such project initiated at the Chicago Teachers' College, and later disseminated into Chicago's public schools and local neighborhoods, Dewey (1996) notes that "a large group of foreign parents came in close contact with it, discovered that it was a real force in the neighborhood, and that they could cooperate with it" (MW 8:271). In this instance, the normative force of the school garden was felt beyond the school yard, resulting in a broader movement to create and sustain community gardens. For Dewey, the point of the school garden was not to assimilate the children of new immigrants to the American way of life or instill American sensibilities about how to interact with nature.

## **Neoliberalism and Gardening Activism**

What I am arguing for is that community gardening is a political act. However, this does not mean that gardening for the nativist or the assimilationist is any less of a politically-charged

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<sup>11</sup> According to Community Studies scholar Mary Beth Pudup (2008), the early twentieth-century discourse around community gardening also became a means for cultivating "a strong work ethic and steady work habits . . . [in] those new Americans [or recent immigrants]" (p. 1230).

<sup>12</sup> Dewey would have been familiar with the view, common among progressive reformers, that school and community gardening in urban areas helped cultivate the virtues associated with the rural living, especially farming (hard work, thrifty, etc.). Environmental historian Kevin Armitage (2009) writes: "Many supporters of urban gardens viewed gardeners, especially school gardeners, as little farmers, thus bringing the virtues of rural labor to urban denizens. For progressives, so appalled by the corrupt and debasing features of industrial society, the tenets of agrarianism seemed, by comparison, not merely benign but laudable" (p. 172).

activity than it is for the community gardener, gardening activist (including guerrilla gardener) or Deweyan educator. By conceiving community gardening as a ‘political’, I mean that the activity is radical, contestational and sometimes even subversive, responding to efforts by government and private interests to deregulate, privatize and enclose the commons.<sup>13</sup> Gardeners whose interests are similarly affected form what Dewey called “publics” and Nancy Fraser refers to a “subaltern counterpublics,” resisting private interests and government actors that would eliminate or privatize public gardens (Dewey 1996, LW 2:255; Fraser 1992, p. 123). Consequently, community gardens become sites of contestation against neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism is first and foremost an economic theory that extols individual initiative and market efficiency as values fundamental to the achievement of human prosperity. Neoliberal discourse is usually traced back to “the Washington Consensus” of the 1980s and 1990s, when policy analysts and political leaders reacted to the global economic crisis of the 1970s by repudiating Keynesian economic policies of government regulation and wealth redistribution.<sup>14</sup> As an alternative, they embraced fundamentalist market principles such as staunch fiscal discipline, trickle-down tax reform, market-determined interest rates, privatization of public services and the liberalization of foreign trade policy. Neoliberalism has also expanded beyond the economic domain into the wider culture. Governments and private interests apply the logic of markets and entrepreneurial competition to most areas of social life on the rationale that it will produce increased efficiency and, therefore, greater human happiness. However, empirical studies have shown that where capitalism and neoliberalism flourish (especially in rich countries), people are typically less happy because many of the things that humans value (e.g. community, solidarity, trust, and work satisfaction) are treated as externalities (or irrelevant third-part effects) in market models.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the same mechanisms that yield material prosperity—free markets and entrepreneurial spirit—weaken bonds of friendship, sow seeds of mistrust, produce widespread anomie and alienate people from their work and community.<sup>16</sup>

How do community gardeners and gardening activists resist and overcome neoliberal forces? One plausible explanation is offered by Nick Couldry in his recent book *Why Voice Matters*. According to Couldry (2010), neoliberal discourse has established its own rationality, whereby efficiency and innovation are the exclusive ends that human agents should pursue, inserting itself at all levels of society and social organization in what he terms neoliberalism’s “extended history of . . . *normalization*” (p. 5, author’s emphasis). Similar to Marxian false consciousness, neoliberal rationality restructures the ways in which we conceive our own personal identity (e.g. as consumers rather than persons), how we understand our own interests (e.g. consumption rather than enjoyment) and the manner in which we interact with others (e.g. as competitors rather than collaborators). The result is that we can no longer imagine or speak in favor of an alternative to the neoliberal system under which we live. When neoliberals insist that markets should determine the extent of human freedom, Couldry (2010) argues, they deny what he terms ‘voice’ or the capacity of human beings to narrate a story about themselves and the values they hold dear, whether individually or collectively (pp. 7, 137). In order to push back against

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<sup>13</sup> This definition of politics resembles Nick Couldry’s (2010) expansive sense, which is itself inspired by David Easton’s (1965) account: “[P]olitics in a broader sense ... [is] the space where struggle and debate over ‘the authoritative allocation of goods, services and values’ take place” (p. 3).

<sup>14</sup> See Harvey (2005) and Peet (2007).

<sup>15</sup> See Layard (2005) and Scitovsky (1976).

<sup>16</sup> See Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and Lane (2000).

neoliberal discourse and its hegemonic rationality, Couldry recommends a “counter-neoliberal rationality” and “post-neoliberal politics” that do not exclude voice, but permit individuals and communities to define value independently of market efficiencies and entrepreneurial innovation (pp. 136-7). Although Couldry does not comment on community gardening or garden activism, his argument has implications for both insofar as gardeners, gardening educators and future gardeners can reclaim their voice, or the ability to tell their own story, through the activity of gardening. A gardening narrative about the values of community, solidarity, self-sufficiency and honest work emerges to counteract neoliberal forces.

One possible objection to my account so far is that today’s neoliberals would appreciate Dewey as an intellectual ally.<sup>17</sup> This objection originates with a common misunderstanding that Dewey was an apologist for the classical liberalism and rapacious capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precursors to contemporary neoliberalism.<sup>18</sup> However, this view is clearly mistaken. In “Democracy Is Radical,” Dewey observes the rise of capitalist or “bourgeois” democracy in the U.S., where “power rests finally in the hands of finance capitalism, no matter what claims are made for government of, by and for the people” (LW 11:296). He acknowledges that the rise of this elitist species of democracy has occurred in “the name of liberalism,” a distinctively American invention which strives “for a maximum of individualistic economic action with a minimum of social control” in the interests of the wealthy and powerful (LW 11:297). Rather than affirm the value of capital-driven liberal democracy, Dewey criticizes the forces behind it for harming the life prospects of the mass of underprivileged and disenfranchised citizens in American society. He argues that the proper “end of democracy” should be “a radical end,” the end of radically transforming “existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural,” enlarging existing opportunities and improving capacities for Americans, not only the propertied elite (LW 11:298-9). Dewey’s goal of investing public resources in community projects to augment “public collective intelligence” is entirely at odds with contemporary neoliberalism and perfectly compatible with the spirit of gardening activism that resists the deleterious consequences of neoliberal policies.

### **Cultural Geography and Gardening Activism**

Perhaps what gives gardens their political meaning are those practical features that all gardens—including dooryard gardens, house gardens, community gardens, allotment gardens and school gardens—share in common.<sup>19</sup> According to Clarissa Kimber (2004), “[a]ll . . . gardens depend on the gardeners for maintenance and are spaces made meaningful by the actions of people during the course of their everyday lives” (p. 263). More than philosophers, cultural geographers have consistently explored the connections between community gardening and political activism. For example, Lauren Baker (2004) has conducted research on Toronto’s Community Food-Security (CFS) movement, which is not only about gardening, but also about challenging the food system status quo (especially its corporate leaders) and securing alternative food sources (food

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<sup>17</sup> I thank the referee for posing this objection.

<sup>18</sup> See Callan (1990), Feinberg (1972) and Karier (1972) for examples of this misunderstanding. Also, see Waddington’s (2008) attempt to correct it.

<sup>19</sup> On allotment gardening, see Scott (2010).

security) for area residents (especially immigrants and the poor).<sup>20</sup> Christopher Smith and Hilda Kurtz (2003) consider the controversy over New York City Mayor Giuliani's plan to auction and redevelop the land occupied by 114 community gardens, describing it as "a politics of scale in which garden advocates contested the fragmentation of social urban space wrought by the application of neoliberal policies" (p. 193). Giuliani's redevelopment project exemplifies neoliberal economic policy, for it attempts to privatize public use land, maximize property values and, ultimately, remove government involvement in a free market.<sup>21</sup> Mary Beth Pudup (2008) describes the conflict between New York City gardening activists and the Giuliani administration in the early 1990s, claiming that "gardening in such collective settings is an unalloyed act of resistance" (p. 1232). Poised to contest neoliberal policies at various geographical scales (local, city-wide and state-wide), members of New York City's gardening coalition successfully ended Giuliani's ambitious plan to redevelop and auction the public land. The city's extensive network of community gardening activists, including guerrilla gardeners, prevailed.

Besides describing the relationship between community gardening and political activism, social geographers have tracked the social conditions and historical trends that give rise to gardening movements. Hilda Kurtz (2001) identifies patterns of urban blight, disinvestment and gentrification as well as, on a more conceptual level, the need for marginalized populations, especially immigrants and the impoverished, to redefine the meanings of "community" and "gardening" (p. 656). In the U.S., from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, vacant urban lots were converted to gardening sites to provide relief during war-time and economic crises, but disappeared when food shortages ended and government support declined (p. 658). Beginning in the 1960s, planted urban lots changed from relief gardens into community gardens, as their purpose transitioned from supplementing food production to offering "green spaces for neighborhood sociability . . . a more localized and more complex response to the experience of economic distress" (p. 659). Likewise, Mary Beth Pudup (2008) examines the historical patterns of mass gardening movement mobilization the United States. Similar to Michel Foucault's interpretative approach, hers focuses on the ways in which people talk about their practices: "To understand organized garden projects in any given era, we must attempt to characterize their discourses, demonstrate their several effects, and show how differing tropes within the larger discursive formation concatenate in specific urban settings" (p. 1232).<sup>22</sup> Her discourses analysis situates the individual *qua* gardener in a plural network of entrenched and reactionary centers of social-political power. Pudup (2008) conceives gardens as "spaces of neoliberal governmentality," by which she means opportunities for individuals and groups to adjust to socio-economic crises

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<sup>20</sup> According to Baker (2004), over 100 gardens in the city of Toronto (Ontario, Canada) have become "sites of place-based politics connected to the community food-security movement" (p. 305). Baker describes two exemplary gardens in the CFS network and concludes: "The gardens [in Toronto] are examples of how groups of typically marginalized citizens—immigrants and people living on low incomes—use their neighborhood as a means of resistance, asserting their identity to reclaim space and engage in projects of citizenship" (p. 323).

<sup>21</sup> Smith and Kurtz (2003) document the various tactics employed by New York City's gardening activists: "First, garden activists held demonstrations in key public places in order to raise awareness about the struggles of community gardens in New York City and gain valuable news coverage. Second, activists linked the struggle to save gardens with other political struggles and took part in preplanned political events sponsored by non-garden-related organizations. Third, activists used the Internet as a resource for broadening the scope of the struggle and encouraged support from extralocal audiences. Fourth, the garden coalition built on this extension of the spaces of engagement to use formal channels such as lawsuits to stop the auction. Fifth, garden advocates built . . . social networks to raise funds that were to be used to purchase the gardens had the auction taken place" (pp. 205-206).

<sup>22</sup> See Foucault (1991a, 1991b, 2008).



created by capitalist regimes—such as lowered employment, disruptive culture wars, growing wealth disparities and reduced government services—through “self-help technologies centered on personal contact with nature” (p. 1228). During periods of economic uncertainty, such as the Great Depression and the present economic recession, gardening movements have thrived as citizens seek cheaper recreational activities and greater food security through the cultivation of community gardens. Also, school gardens, along with nature study, became staples of primary and secondary school education during periods of mass immigration, as policy-makers and educators saw gardening and studying nature as ways to instill distinctly American virtues in new immigrants (Pudup 2008, p. 1230). Through her analysis, Pudup (2008) confirms that most contemporary gardening movements constitute reactions to the negative effects of neoliberal policies: “[C]ommunity gardening has been a response to pronounced and recurring cycles of capitalist restructuring and their tendency to displace people and places through investment processes governing industries and urban space” (p. 1229).

Cultural geographers have also identified various functions that community gardens fulfill and the strategies garden activists employ to sustain them. In a study of the Loisiada gardens in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Karen Schmelzkopf (1995) identifies various functions that gardening fulfills, such as socializing youth and providing healthy food in a poor, crime-infested area of New York City. In this way, the gardens encourage social and economic solidarity. Yet, with a shortage of housing for the area’s poor, community gardens have also become sites of political contestation, not just between advocates of neo-liberal economic policies and gardening activists, but also between low-income housing advocates and community gardening activists. Schmelzkopf writes: “Several of the large gardens have become politically contested spaces, and conflicting community needs have led to a dilemma of whether to develop the land for low-income and market-rate housing or to preserve the gardens” (p. 364). As part of his administration’s failed policy of selling off the land occupied by New York City’s immense network of community gardens, Smith and Kurtz (2003) note, Giuliani tried to exploit this weakness within the gardening movement (p. 204).

### **School Gardening and Growth**

Many writings on school gardening invoke the growth of plants as a metaphor for the growth of children and the communities to which they belong.<sup>23</sup> School gardening had its heyday in the late nineteenth century, buoyed by nature study advocates such as Dewey, and was sustained for almost a quarter-century thereafter. In the 1970s, school gardening became reinvigorated in a slightly different form, the “farm to work” program, which educates children about the process of food production. A more recent hybrid of school gardening and farm to work programs is the “Life Lab Curriculum,” whereby “hands-on, garden-centered science curriculum that link the lessons of the garden to other domains of learning” (Pudup 2008, p. 1236). For Dewey (1996), the school and the school garden are microcosms for the larger community and its

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<sup>23</sup> A nice example of the growth metaphor can be found in an early work on school gardens by Greene (1910): “The garden is becoming the outer classroom of the school, and its plots are its blackboards. The garden is not an innovation, or an excrescence, or an addendum, or a diversion. It is a happy field of expression, an organic part of the school in which the boys and girls work among growing things and grow themselves in body and mind and spiritual outlook.” A competing metaphor is that of wedding technology and nature, or the “machine in the garden” (p. 18). Also, see Marx (1964).

own gardens; as one grows, so does the other (or at least that is the goal): “The common needs and aims [of the school and community] demand a growing interchange of thought and growing unity of sympathetic feeling” (MW 1:10). The activity of school gardening could be one example of how Dewey’s somewhat ambiguous notion of growth translates into a more practical pedagogical ideal.<sup>24</sup> Similar to Dewey, Mary Beth Pudup (2008) insists that the common denominator between school gardening and community gardening is growth: “In the [gardening] discourses . . . there exists an unambiguous relationship between plants and people, and specifically between how plants, like people, grow and flourish with proper care and nurture” (p. 1235).

Both Pudup and Larry Hickman explore how specific school gardening projects facilitate growth. Pudup (2008) examines a successful school garden project in Berkeley, California, started by Alice Waters in the 1980s: the Edible School Yard or ESY. She defines it as “a school garden program that foregrounds the production and especially consumption of food by middle school students and with that foregrounding, a very specific discourse and politics of food centering on organic localism” (Pudup 2008, p. 1236).<sup>25</sup> Children at King Middle School tend their own vegetable garden, harvest the produce and transfer the bounty to the school’s kitchen classroom, where they learn to cook what they’ve grown. Eventually the students sit down with their teachers to eat the product of their labors, giving them a heightened appreciation for the interconnectedness of food production, preparation and consumption—or simply described, the cycle “from seed to garden” (Pudup 2008:1236). By “cultivating citizen-subjects” with greater awareness of the connections between food, plants and place, the ESY program can influence children to buy organically and locally, tend personal and community gardens and participate in grassroots gardening movements as adults. Larry Hickman (2000) identifies promising similarities between ESY and John Dewey’s work on school gardening. For Hickman, ESY bears a striking resemblance to Dewey’s experimental curriculum begun in the late 1890s at the University of Chicago’s Experimental School. In the Experimental School, school-age students learned about mathematics, natural history, food science, and economic principles by both gardening and cooking the produce of the garden. According to Hickman, what distinguished the two projects is the difference of problems that confronted the designers almost a century apart. While Alice Waters’ concern was with how to improve students’ diets, Dewey’s was with introducing students “to a whole range of subjects that involved increasing levels of abstraction [such as history, botany, and economics]” (Hickman 2000, p. 198). Despite this slight difference in emphasis, both Waters and Dewey wished to instill habits of living and learning, thereby enabling the personal and collective growth of future generations.

Similar to school gardens, contemporary community gardens generate social goods (e.g. fellow feeling, cooperative spirit and companionship) that resist the alienating effects of neoliberalism. Community gardeners typically organize to undermine neoliberal forces that would dissolve the bonds of their community by segregating them into individual consumers and transforming them into marketplace competitors. School gardening advocates such as Dewey and Waters assemble the educators, curricula and institutional means to improve the lives and life prospects of students through exposure to the gardening experience. It stands to reason that one would offer a gateway to the other. Educating future generations of community gardeners who

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<sup>24</sup> On the ambiguity in Dewey’s notion of growth, see Ralston (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Information on ESY can be found on their website: <http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/>.

would carry on the fight against neoliberal policies demands a suitable pedagogical instrument: namely, school gardening.

## Two Objections

In the previous discussion, I have intentionally avoided the legal dimension of guerrilla gardening and, particularly, the objection that this form of activism is indefensible on any grounds (let alone, Deweyan ones) because it involves illegal activity, namely, occupying or squatting on private property. I have done this for two reasons: (i) because my argument applies not just to guerrilla gardening, but more generally to community gardening, and the latter does not typically involve illegal activity; and (ii) because the more pressing need is to focus on the compelling ethical, political and educational grounds for understanding school gardening as a gateway to community gardening and gardening activism, which may or may not include guerrilla gardening. To briefly respond to the illegality objection, though, private property rights are *not* unqualified or inviolable. For instance, a person who owns a piece of land may refuse every reasonable offer by a municipal government to purchase it. The owner's unwillingness to sell may not stand in the way of the government's legal right to seize the property. The municipality can "condemn" the property or exercise the legal power of eminent domain, paying the owner the land's fair market value, when the perceived advantages to the public good—say to build a highway or a green belt—reach an acceptable threshold. Likewise, property owners only have a legal right to their property on the condition that they pay property taxes. Otherwise, a government may put a lien on the property or take ownership in order to repay back taxes. While guerrilla gardeners are not government agents, and often-times the property they garden is publicly owned, they are nevertheless citizens, and thus they have a *prima facie* claim to the property that they wish to reclaim and beautify for the public good.

The second objection I would like to take up is that the school curriculum should not be politicized. This is often referred to as the problem of the hidden curriculum, or the tacit ideological dimension of what is taught in the schools, as discussed by educational scholars Philip Jackson (1968) and Michael Apple (1979). Whether it is the Straussian/neo-conservative agenda implicit in the Great Books approach or the Progressive agenda underlying child-centered learning, the politicization of today's school curricula is an ever present concern. Although Dewey never addressed the hidden curriculum, he did speak to the perennial problem of the hiding curriculum, or the widening gap between the specialized subject matter of a formal education and the common sense subject matter of an informal education, the so-called lessons learned through everyday experience and problem solving (MW 9:12, 141, 255). The hidden and hiding curricula are related insofar as political ideologies influence the ways in which we informally learn about the world around us, so that our formal educational experience is at least in this respect no different.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, to claim that the curriculum should be de-politicized is problematic, for politics and ideology enter everywhere into the curricula, whether in the subject-matter or the method of teaching. An ethically responsible way to navigate the difficult straits of the hidden curriculum is to encourage honest communication between faculty, administrators and parents,

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<sup>26</sup> For a fuller treatment of the problem of the relationship between the hidden and hiding curricula, see Page (2006).

whether concerning the political valence of the gardening curriculum or what school gardening is specifically intended to prepare students for.

### **Conclusion: Ethical Tools for Gardening Educators**

Having disposed of the illegality and hidden curriculum objections, I would like to suggest some resources for Deweyan pedagogues intent on educating future community gardeners and gardening activists (including guerrilla gardeners). Writings on gardening, garden movements and school gardens, whether by philosophers, community studies scholars or cultural geographers, offer educators a rough set of ethical/conceptual tools to make school gardening a gateway to community gardening and garden activism. Gardening provides the material and intellectual conditions for an entire community to flourish. According to Serenella Iovino (2010), “the garden is in fact a moral allegory” (p. 278). It is a story of how humans cultivate their own potential as moral agents, taking into consideration the interests of others. While the design of a personal garden might restrict benefits to a single family, community gardens offer more people greater access to nutritious meals, physical activity and, as a result, greater physical and mental health.<sup>27</sup> In the community garden, the emphasis is on constructing spaces of discourse, in which citizen-subjects are constituted through social interaction and grassroots political activity (Pudup 2008, p. 1232). Therefore, following Couldry’s call for voice, the gardening educator should cultivate in the young gardener the ability to relate uplifting moral narratives, particularly as a way to perpetuate garden projects and their social benefits from one generation to the next. School gardens are, then, moral spaces for educating future generations of community gardeners and gardening activists.

Gardens are potential sources of social solidarity, bringing together poor and immigrant populations to forge common bonds, or, as in the case of the community gardens in New York City, sites of internal contestation, particularly between low-income housing advocates and gardening activists. The way to ease such intramural conflict over the relative prioritization of low-cost housing and shared gardens is to re-frame the issue. As New York City gardening activists discovered in their fight against the Giuliani administration, it is possible to defuse the either-housing-or-gardens argument by suggesting a third option: housing and gardens. According to Smith and Kurtz (2003), “[g]arden advocates did not deny the housing shortage; rather, they insisted that the city needs both housing and gardens as complementary elements of a healthy city” (p. 204). The error in this either-or style of policy argument is familiar to both the philosopher, as the fallacy of bifurcation, and the policy analyst, as a Hobson’s choice. Whether the garden activist looks to the philosopher, the policy analyst or the example of New York City’s gardening activists, she should attempt to recast such disjunctive policy frames so that they include a third collectively beneficial option. Gardens also offer spaces for adults and children to share their stories and transfer ideas from one generation to the next. Narrative within the garden environment always starts in *media res*, disseminating valuable insights to later generations of community gardeners and gardening activists. The same is true of the school garden. As Dewey (1996)

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<sup>27</sup> For empirical evidence of these benefits, see Sarah Wakefield et al.’s (2007) study of community gardens in Toronto, Canada. Based on a series of focus groups and personal interviews, they conclude that “[c]ommunity gardens were seen to contribute to improved nutrition among gardeners and their families. In addition, the opportunity for physical activity that gardening presented was seen as beneficial to health, especially for the elderly. For many, being part of a community garden was stress-relieving, and was thought to contribute to improved mental health” (p. 100).

illustrated in his school design, a school should not only be connected to a garden, but should also have a central area in which children and adults can meet and discuss (MW 1:5051). Likewise, preserving our contact with nature, even in urban environments, is integral to the welfare of future generations. Dewey writes: “The best we can accomplish for posterity is to transmit unimpaired and with some increment of meaning the environment that makes it possible to maintain the habits of a decent and refined life. Our individual habits are links in forming the endless chain of humanity. Their significance depends upon the environment inherited from our forerunners, and it is enhanced as we foresee the fruits of our labors in the world in which our successors live” (LW14:19). Read together, cultural geographers’ work on gardening activism and Dewey’s treatment of school gardening suggest that involvement in school gardening represents a metaphorical “gateway” for youth to grow into adults who might actively participate in community gardening and garden activism, including guerrilla gardening. In this way, school gardens function as inter-generational bridges.

Organized garden projects can become sites of political protest, opportunities for people who have been previously marginalized to formulate alternative discourses and to partake in communities of interest that push back against neoliberal forces. After narrating the dispute between New York City community gardeners and the Guiliani administration, Pudup (2008) discloses the normative significance of gardens as sites of political contestation and resistance: “Under such conditions, urban community gardens claim [that] their very existence signifies resistance: resistance defines the space because something other than growing food and flowers ‘could’ or really ‘should’ be taking place there” (p. 1232). Dewey discouraged the early association of school gardening and nature study with the nativist movement, conceiving both as channels to more enriching adult experiences, not as paths toward assimilation and nationalism. One of those experiences that school gardening can prepare children for is environmental advocacy, particularly involvement in gardening movements. Dewey did not mention this collateral benefit. Nevertheless, an argument (one might even call it a *Deweyan* argument) has been made that gardening advocacy—or, more specifically, participation in politically-motivated gardening movements—is an acceptable exegesis of what Dewey described as “a civic turn” to school gardening. As one guerilla gardening manifesto reads, “When you’re a guerilla gardener, you’re an active participant in the living environment. You’re no longer content to merely react to what happens to the spaces around you. You’re a player, which means you help determine how those spaces get used. And when you’re in tune like this, every plant counts” (Tracey 2007, p. 32). School gardens could become incubators for urban gardening activists, including community and guerilla gardeners—places to teach future generations that gardening is an empowering activity, whether as means to create moral spaces, sources of social solidarity, inter-generational bridges or sites of ongoing political contestation.

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