

# IT TAKES A GARDEN PROJECT

## DEWEY AND PUDUP ON THE POLITICS OF SCHOOL GARDENING

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What is the normative significance of school gardening for environmental activism and activists today? Philosophical treatments generally highlight gardening's importance for human well-being, aesthetic theory, and urban landscape design. Several accounts of John Dewey's educational philosophy draw attention to the school gardens tended by students at the University of Chicago's Experimental School. However, these typically neglect the social and political significance of Dewey's writings on school gardening. One way to bring the normative dimension of school gardening to the fore is to compare Dewey's work on the topic with more recent scholarship on the politics of gardening movements. In this paper, the object of comparison is an essay by the Community Studies scholar Mary Beth Pudup. While Pudup's and Dewey's approaches are not identical, the comparison proves fruitful in so far as it exposes the political reasons for gardening education, relates school gardening to contemporary gardening movements and gives the call for creating more school garden projects greater normative force—or so I argue.

*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 (1996, MW 8:269)<sup>1</sup>

*...we understand different episodes in the history of organized garden projects as distinct discursive formations that have been constituted through material practice and myriad discourses or tropes during each era by advocates, organizers, observers, participants, and theoreticians.*  
—Mary Beth Pudup (2008, 1229)

What is the normative significance of school gardening for environmental activism today? While philosophical treatments generally highlight gardening's importance for human well-being, aesthetic theory and urban landscape design, few of these treatments offer the "green" reformer more than minimal encouragement and a sense of historical context with which to guide her activism. For instance, several accounts of John Dewey's educational philosophy draw attention to the school gardens tended by students at the University of Chicago's Experimental School. However, these typically neglect the social and political significance of Dewey's writings on school gardening. One way to bring the normative dimension of school gardening to the fore is to compare Dewey's work on the subject with more recent scholarship on the politics of gardening movements. In this paper, the object of comparison is an essay by the Community Studies scholar Mary Beth Pudup. She understands the periodic interest in community gardening, or what she refers to as "community garden projects," throughout American history as integral to broader discourses about economic subsistence, educational uplift and plant-human relationships, all of which represent responses to a phenomenon she terms "neoliberal rollback." Although Dewey was not explicitly political in his endorsement of school gardens,<sup>2</sup> he did advocate for them against a rich background of political ideas and events, namely, a burgeoning nature study movement, which he supported, and a strong anti-immigrant (or nativist) movement, which he opposed.<sup>3</sup> So, while Pudup's and Dewey's approaches are not identical, the comparison proves fruitful in so far as it exposes the political reasons for gardening education, relates school gardening to contemporary gardening movements and gives the call for creating more school garden projects greater normative force—or so I argue.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section, I survey the recent literature in environmental philosophy and ethics on school and community gardening, demonstrating that Dewey is a central figure in that emergent literature. The second section draws the connection between

Dewey's endorsement of school gardening and the Progressive era nature study movement. In the third section, I ask and answer the question: Why choose Pudup's work on school gardening as an adjunct to Dewey's, especially when there is so much excellent scholarly work on the subject authored by cultural geographers? The fourth section details Pudup's argument in "It Takes a Garden" for organized garden projects that ameliorate the social problems generated by the growth and encroachment of the neoliberal state. In the fifth and concluding section, I propose a set of ethical tools for activists in the contemporary gardening movement, each related to Dewey and Pudup's practical experience with and scholarly analyses of school and community gardening.

### PHILOSOPHY, GARDENS AND GARDEN POLITICS

Generally, philosophers have shown little scholarly interest in the activity of gardening.<sup>4</sup> "In neglecting the garden," David Cooper (2006) notes, "philosophy is therefore ignoring not merely a current fashion, but activities and experiences of abiding human significance" (2). 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 of art and, if so, what kind? Indeed, comparatively-speaking, more philosophical energy has been devoted to exploring the artistic dimension of gardening than all others. Cooper (2006) insists that despite this disproportionate attention, "the significance of the garden cannot be restricted to the domain of the aesthetic" (4). Instead, philosophers should ask why we garden, what ends and values the activity serves, and how the garden fits into the gardener's (as well as her community's) conception of the good life (Cooper 2006, 5–6). The last question, if pushed sufficiently, could reveal the political import of the gardening habit. Unfortunately, the question of gardening's relation to our conception of the good life is rarely explored to this extent, and thus very little has been written by philosophers concerning the political dimension of gardening.

One philosopher who does make a connection between politics and gardening is Isis Brook. She draws attention to 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, 298; 2010b, 13–25). In Gerald Durrell's *Corfu Trilogy*, she identifies four features of the child's expe-

rience of nature—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”)—that operate as metaphorical gateways to enriched adult experiences (Brook 2010a, 296–98). Brook (2010a) also sees gardening as an opportunity for children to be liberated, if just temporarily, from adult supervision, to allow their imagination to range broadly and to face anxieties about not realizing their potential (304–05). Of the author’s four practical examples, her account of the guerilla gardening movement is worth quoting at length:

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 grenades with water filled ballons or Christmas baubles packed with seeds and fertilizer, or the more ecologically respectable seed bombs of molded compost and plant seeds (Brooke 2010a, 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.

Two environmental philosophers with pragmatist leanings, Anthony Weston and Roger King, also identify the gardening habit as a gateway to a fuller appreciation of nature. Weston believes that gardening brings the gardener into closer contact with the Earth, its flora and fauna:

Buried in dirt and horse manure, I recognize a richer truth. I am, again, part of the Earth, in the simplest and most concrete way. In the garden I belong to a multispecies community of certain plants and insects and animals, in league against others. There are plants them-

selves, obviously, for whom I am a means to flourishing and perhaps reproduction, their ally and retainer, the minor matter of my borrowing some fruit notwithstanding (Weston 1994, 124).

Weston's gardening narrative parallels Aldo Leopold's (1966) argument in *The Sand County Almanac* that humans have an ethical responsibility to be good stewards and citizens of the land community (262). Moreover, it lends support to the biophilia hypothesis, namely, that prolonged, high-quality exposure to nature cultivates human capacities. In the essay "Towards an Ethics of the Domesticated Environment," Roger King argues that environmental ethicists should speak more directly to the value of domesticated or mixed human/nature spaces. To better appreciate the nexus between nature and culture, "we must think about the relationship between the kinds of spaces we occupy on a daily basis and the wild spaces that environmental ethics most wants to protect" (King 2003, 4). Underappreciated nature in urban areas—including the roadside verge, abandoned city lot, and unused space beneath a bridge or overpass—become more relevant to discussions of environmental value, whether instrumental or intrinsic. Since these neglected natural/urban spaces increase in value when reclaimed or beautified (through the application of human labor), they factor more strongly into our everyday experience of nature than wilderness. According to King (2003), "we do not know what those activities [shopping, eating, walking, and enjoying outdoor activities] really mean unless we know how they have been spatially organized and ordered by those who, intentionally or inadvertently, have designed where they took place" (8). Likewise, we will never fully appreciate gardening's philosophical significance until we know how gardens, understood as mixed nature/culture spaces, come into existence.

Outside their origin as domesticated spaces and their function as gateways to activism, few philosophers acknowledge that school gardens have political import because of the American philosopher John Dewey. Two exceptions are Ben Minter and Larry Hickman. Comparing Dewey to the nature study pioneer Liberty Hyde Bailey, Minter demonstrates that both shared a vision of civic environmentalism. In Minter's (2006) words, "Dewey recognized and appreciated the potential of nature study to cultivate an emotional, aesthetic, and even ethical attachment to the natural world among schoolchildren" (36). While strengthening the child's bond with her environment, the activity of gardening also en-

courages community activism and political engagement. Minter (2006) writes: "Dewey thought that such an environment [of dynamic and experiential learning] would allow students to gain the skills, knowledge, and motivation required to become intelligent and active democratic citizens" (31). In the next section, more will be said about Dewey's involvement in the nature study movement. For Hickman (2000), the Edible Schoolyard (ESY) initiated by Alice Waters in the 1990s, and highlighted by Mary Beth Pudup in her essay "It Takes a Garden," bears a striking resemblance to Dewey's experimental curriculum, begun in the late 1890s (195–202). In the Experimental School at the University of Chicago, 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, almost a century apart, confronting both designers. While Alice Waters' main 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, 198). More importantly, both highlighted the political dimension of the gardening experience.

#### SUSTAINABILITY, NATURE STUDY AND SCHOOL GARDENS

Sustainability rests on the three pillars of social justice, economic growth and environmental health. It is no wonder, then, that David Hildebrand (2008) claims that Dewey's thought anticipates what would nowadays be called a "philosophy of sustainability," concerned as it is with how to "adapt, survive, and grow" in a dynamic social, economic and environmental context (x). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, 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>5</sup> The reasoning was that if in childhood people developed a genuine interest in the natural world, whether a sentimental fascination or a scientific curiosity, then as they grew older they would almost inevitably seek to preserve it (Armitage 2009, 115). Unlike many of the movement's founders, Dewey endorsed neither an exclusively sentimental nor an exclusively scientific rationale for studying nature.<sup>6</sup> "Work in nature study is undergoing reorganization," he wrote, "so that pupils shall actually get a feeling for plants

and animals, together with some real scientific knowledge, not simply the rather sentimental descriptions and rhapsodizing of literature” (Dewey 1996, MW 8:266). 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 Ben Minter’s (2006) estimation, “Dewey’s enthusiasm for nature study was obviously much more than a case of fanatical science worship” (36).

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” (1267). For Dewey, though, nature study was virtually synonymous with partaking in occupations out-of-doors, including 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>7</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 is an activity that 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 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” (Dewey 1996, 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. 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).

In *The School and Society*, Dewey (1996) proposed a novel design for a school based on the organization of a home and an attached garden. The ideal home contains “a workshop” and “a miniature laboratory,” as well as an extension “out of doors to the garden, surrounding fields, and forest,” all of which are mimicked in the ideal school (MW 1:50). Dewey envisioned four rooms in the ideal school, each on the corner of a central museum/library and each devoted to an individual area of study (e.g., physical/chemical science, biology, music, and art). Four recitation rooms sit half in the four rooms and half in the central museum/library, “where the children bring the experiences, the problems, the questions, the particular facts which they have found, and discuss them so that new light may be thrown upon them, particularly new light from the experience of others, the accumulated wisdom of the world—symbolized in the library” (Dewey 1996, MW 1:51). Dewey’s school design is based on the hypothesis that if we create shared public spaces, including gardens, for the purpose of pooling our ideas and sharing our experiences (i.e., social intelligence), then we can effectively increase opportunities for discussion and learning.

#### **CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY, NEOLIBERALISM, AND GARDENING ACTIVISM**

For quite some time, cultural geographers have noticed that what gives the garden its cultural capital and political significance are the features that all gardens—including dooryard gardens, house gardens, community gardens, allotment gardens, and school gardens—share in common.<sup>8</sup> Ac-



ording to Clarissa Kimber (2004), “All...gardens depend on the gardeners for maintenance and are spaces made meaningful by the actions of people during the course of their everyday lives” (263). So, the question arises: Why choose an essay by a Community Studies scholar rather than a sampling of works by cultural geographers in order to explore the normative significance of school gardens? The short answer to this question is that Mary Beth Pudup’s commentary on the ESY project is orthogonal to Dewey’s writings on nature study and the gardening curriculum as well as Hickman’s aforementioned essay. The longer and more informative answer to the question requires an exposition and analysis of several studies of garden politics conducted by cultural geographers.

More so than philosophers, cultural geographers have consistently explored the connections between gardening projects and political activism. For example, Lauren Baker (2004) studied over 100 gardens in the city of Toronto (Ontario, Canada) that have become “sites of place-based politics connected to the community food-security movement” (305). Toronto’s Community Food-Security (CFS) movement is not only about gardening, but also challenging the food system status quo (especially its corporate leaders) and securing alternative food sources (food security) for area residents (especially immigrants and the poor). Baker (2004) 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” (323). Christopher Smith and Hilda Kurtz (2003) consider the controversy over former 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” (193). Giuliani’s redevelopment project exemplified what Pudup calls “neoliberal roll-back,” the attempt to privatize public property and, ultimately, undo Keynesian economic policies that give rise to government interventions in a free market.<sup>9</sup> Smith and Kurtz 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 (Smith and Kurtz 2003, 205–06).

Poised to contest neoliberal policies at various geographical scales (local, city-wide, and state-wide), members of New York City's gardening coalition successfully stopped Giuliani's ambitious plan to redevelop and auction the public land. The city's extensive network of community gardening activists prevailed.

Besides describing the history, organization and tactics of gardening movements, social geographers have explored the underlying causes and specific functions of community gardening projects as well as their political implications. Among them, 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" (656). In the US, from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, vacant urban lots were converted to gardening sites to provide relief during wartime and economic crises, but disappeared when food shortages ended and government support declined (Kurtz 2001, 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" (Kurtz 2001, 658). In a study of the Loisiada gardens in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Karen Schmelzkopf (1995) outlines the various functions that gardening fulfills, including 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: "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” (Schmelzkopf 1995, 364). As part of his administration’s failed attempt to privatize an immense network of community gardens, Giuliani unsuccessfully attempted to exploit this tension between New York City’s low-income housing advocates and community gardening activists (Smith and Kurtz 2003, 204).

Cultural geographers’ scholarly writings on garden politics represent descriptively rich accounts of gardening movements, causes and functions of gardening projects, and invaluable details about grassroots gardening politics. My intention is not to diminish this enormous contribution. However, they do not speak directly to the normative significance of the activity. Moreover, cultural geographers are wont to make the inferential leap from school gardening to community gardening, conceiving the former as a metaphorical gateway to the latter.<sup>10</sup> Although the distinction between description and evaluation (also fact and value, empirical and normative) is not strict and exclusive, the difference in emphasis in this case is stark. It makes Pudup’s treatment a better object of comparison, since hers (as we will see) does a better job of capturing the normative force of gardening, particularly school gardening. Nevertheless, philosophers concerned with gardening activism should not neglect the highly relevant work of cultural geographers. Their empirical research and findings reveal the practical opportunities and obstacles for local gardening movements, as well as suggest non-ideal limits on any ideal theory of garden politics.

#### GARDEN PROJECTS, ESY, AND CITIZEN-SUBJECTS

Mary Beth Pudup’s treatment of community and school gardening is decidedly more political than Dewey’s, as well as more normatively oriented than most cultural geographers’ treatments. Influenced by Michel Foucault, she examines the historical patterns of discourse and emerging modes or “tropes” of discussion associated with the practice of mobilizing mass gardening movements within the US.<sup>11</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 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” (1228).<sup>12</sup> For example, 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, 1230). In sum, Pudup (2008) claims that participating in community gardening projects is a political activity, for “community 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” (1229).

Pudup’s approach to studying school gardens is also more sociological and detached, less practical and applied, than Dewey’s approach. Arguing that the dominant notion of “community garden” has exhausted its usefulness, she proposes an alternative, what she calls an “organized garden project”: (i) “An organized group of people is involved in cultivation,” (ii) “The group involved in cultivation has espoused a set of goals for its gardening practice,” and (iii) “The cultivated space is not typically devoted to third-party gardening” (Pudup 2008, 1231). She notices that the discourse surrounding garden projects has periodically changed to suit the political climate. Although the “fretful discourses [of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were intended to instill]...a love of nature, a respect for rural, agricultural values, and the enduring theme of moral rectitude,” discourses of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries focus on retaking and reusing urban land for food production (often referred to as “guerilla gardening”), horticultural therapy (or promoting more harmonious relationships between plants and humans) and, lastly, social movements to preserve, conserve and maintain open and green spaces (what is sometimes called “community greening”) (Pudup 2008, 1232–35). Adapting to changing political realities, contemporary leaders of garden projects and gardening movements have stressed “personal responsibility, empowerment and individual choice,” rather than the more communitarian themes of social cohesion, shared values and group solidarity, which is consistent with what Pudup (2008) calls “neoliberal rationalities,” whereby state power recedes from view as individual initiative takes center-stage in the public square (1230).

Does Pudup emphasize the political dimension of organized garden projects at the expense of the educational dimension? Not exactly—though it is obvious that she speaks far less than Dewey to the pedagogical goals of school gardening. Still, Pudup’s (2008) essay does address how gardening activity educates, particularly in her examination of a successful school garden project in Berkeley, California (1236). 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 was 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, 1236). But Pudup’s (2008) concern is with a specific project in the Bay area of Northern California, the “ESY [Edible School Yard],” which she defines 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” (1236). 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 have grown. Eventually the students sit down with their teachers to eat the product of their labors, giving them a heightened appreciation for the inter-connectedness 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 gardening movements as adults.

#### **NATIVISM, GROWTH, AND GARDENING POLITICS**

How then do we capture the political dimension of Dewey’s writings on school gardening through a comparison with Pudup’s essay? 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 nativism, or the belief that immigration to the United States should be reduced or eliminated, and at a minimum, im-

migrants should undergo intensive assimilation. Historian Adam Rome (2008) describes this nativist impulse: "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" (434). So, nature study was in many cases justified as one technique for assimilating new immigrants to a distinctly American way of interacting with nature, a way that emphasized observation and appreciation, not Old World practices such as pot hunting, peasantry, and peddling. According to Pudup (2008), the early twentieth-century discourse associated with community gardening also became a means for cultivating "a strong work ethic and steady work habits...[in] those new Americans [or recent immigrants]" (1230).

While Dewey appreciated gardening and nature study as means to promote personal and collective growth, even virtue,<sup>13</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 convince 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, not to assimilate new immigrants to the American way of life.

Many writings on school gardening, including Dewey's and Pudup's, draw parallels between the growth of children, community, and plants.<sup>14</sup> For Dewey (1996), the school and the school garden are microcosms for the larger community and its own gardens; as one grows, so does the

other (at least we hope): “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). Indeed, the activity of school gardening could be one instance in which Dewey’s somewhat ambiguous notion of growth translates into a more practical pedagogical ideal.<sup>15</sup> Similar to Dewey, Pudup (2008) insists that the common denominator between school gardening and community gardening, or organized gardening projects, 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” (1235).

Although Pudup and Dewey would agree that school and community gardening promote growth, we might press the issue even further: What kind of growth are they speaking of? For Dewey, it is surely educative growth—that is, guiding the natural impulses of children to interact with nature into productive channels and occupations, such as gardening, cooking, and selling produce. For Pudup, growth that results from school gardening is more political, a matter of rolling back the effects of neoliberal policies which leave communities and individuals without a sense of place or a means of subsistence (e.g. urban blight and economic recession). Also, for Pudup, growth is more individual or personal, assisting the lone citizen and her family to negotiate the vicissitudes of living under a capitalist economic system. According to environmental historian Kevin Armitage (2009), “As a rule, nature study advocates conflated personal and social growth” (17). In contrast to most nature study proponents, Dewey distinguished the two, though he certainly saw one as instrumental to achieving the other. He emphasized the social or communal aspect of growth to a degree that Pudup does not. Similar to Pudup, though, he worried about the appropriation of the community garden by political forces intent upon pressing gardeners and gardening projects into the service of ends other than education and growth. To illustrate, during the Great Depression and both World Wars, growing food in private and community gardens (often called “victory gardens”) became a widespread phenomenon. However, Dewey emphasized the educational consequences of gardening for school-age children and the collateral benefits for communities, instead of the garden as a symbol of American pride and nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION: ETHICAL TOOLS FOR GARDENING ACTIVISTS

Writings on gardening, garden movements and school gardens, whether by philosophers, community studies scholars or cultural geographers, offer gardening activists a rough set of ethical/conceptual tools for advancing their cause:

1. *Gardens as moral spaces*: 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” (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, consequently, greater physical and mental health.<sup>17</sup> Though Pudup (2008) prefers the terminological shift from “community garden” to “organized garden project,” the emphasis is still on constructing spaces of discourse, in which citizen-subjects are constructed through social interaction and grassroots political activity (1232). So, being able to relate uplifting moral narratives, particularly as a way to perpetuate garden projects and their benefits, is an important skill for the garden activist.
2. *Gardens as sources of social solidarity*: Gardens can be hubs of social solidarity, bringing together poor and immigrant populations to forge common bonds, or, as in the case of some 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 conflicts 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), “Garden 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” (204). Indeed, the error in this either-or argument is familiar to both the philosopher, as the fallacy of bifurcation, and the policy analyst, as Hobson’s choice. Whether the garden activist looks to the philosopher, the policy analyst or the example of New York City’s garden activists, the correction is to re-frame the issue to include a third (conjunctive) option.

3. *Gardens as inter-generational bridges*: Gardens offer spaces for adults and children to deliberate, socialize and transfer ideas from one generation to the next. Narratives within the garden environment always start 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) illustrated in his school design, a school should not only be connected to a garden, but should also have a central area for children and adults to deliberate about what they have learned (MW 1:50–51). Read together, Dewey’s and Pudup’s treatments of school gardening suggest that involvement in school gardening represents a metaphorical “gateway” to participation in community gardening and politically-motivated garden activism. In this way, too, school gardens function as intergenerational bridges.
4. *Gardens as sites of political contestation*: Organized garden projects can become sites of political protest, opportunities for people who have been marginalized to formulate alternative discourses and to partake in communities of interest that push back against more powerful interests. After describing the dispute between New York City community gardeners and the Giuliani 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” (1232). Indeed, gardeners whose interests are similarly affected form what Dewey called “publics” and Nancy Fraser refers to a “subaltern counterpublics,” resisting hegemonic actors and government policies that would destroy or privatize public gardens (Dewey 1996, LW 2:255; Fraser 1992, 123).

While the politics of gardening has more resonance for Pudup than for Dewey, Dewey’s school garden writings still have political implications that contemporary commentators overlook at their peril. Dewey detached school gardening and nature study from the nativist’s tool-kit, portraying them as channels to more enriching adult experiences, not as techniques for assimilating immigrant children to a distinctly American way of life. One of those experiences that school gardening can prepare children for is political advocacy, particularly involvement in gardening movements. Dewey did not mention this collateral benefit. Nevertheless, an argument (one might even call it a “Deweyan” argument) can be made that gardening 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. Isis Brook’s example of guerilla gardening, a grassroots movement to illicitly reclaim unused urban land for cultivation and beautification, is *apropos* here. One guerilla gardener confesses:

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 (Reynolds 2008, 14–16).

Another 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, 32). School gardens could become incubators for urban gardening

activists, including guerilla gardeners—places to teach that gardens have normative force, whether as moral spaces, sources of social solidarity, inter-generational bridges or sites of political contestation.

#### NOTES

- 1 Citations to the *Collected Works of John Dewey* resemble the conventional method employed by Dewey scholars: LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or EW (Early Works), followed by volume: page number. For example, MW 9:221 refers to the Middle Works, volume 9, page 221.
- 2 Some of Dewey's contemporaries were explicitly political in their advocacy for community gardens. For instance, Ebenezer Howard (1965) called for the creation of "garden cities" as an extension of his own utopian political vision. Ben Minter (2006) describes Howard as "a product of late nineteenth-century British radicalism—a group of primarily middle-class, non-Marxist communitarians who advocated a decentralized, egalitarian social order supported by dramatic reforms in land ownership, housing, and urban planning" (55). More recent advocates for environmental literacy and natural school reform, such as Richard Louv (2005, 201) and Schlegel et al (2010, 185), see Dewey as a fellow traveler.
- 3 Of course, political growth and educational growth do not exhaust the proper ends, or ends-in-view, of community and school gardening. Besides satisfying political and educational aims, gardens can also be aesthetically pleasing, conveying a felt quality Italian humanist Jacopo Bonfadio described as "nature incorporated with art," or "third nature" (Hunt 2000, 22–32).
- 4 Gardens have also received little serious treatment by environmental historians. According to Kenneth 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" (139).
- 5 Robin G. Shulze (2003) nicely captures the spirit behind 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" (474). For seminal statements of the nature study approach, see Comstock (1939), Coulter (1896) and Jordan (1896).
- 6 For a sample 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. For instance, see Sideris (2010).
- 7 Gardening advocate Benjamin Marshall Davis (1905) demonstrated that soil experiments could be undertaken by school children (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” (6).

- 8 This is not to claim that philosophers have entirely ignored those features of gardens that make them culturally and politically important objects of inquiry. For instance, see Scott’s (2010) philosophical treatment of political activism and allotment gardening.
- 9 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” (1232). For an analysis of recent grassroots activism aimed at undermining neoliberal policies, see Couldry (2010).
- 10 Some cultural geographers note that quality of life improves for children in the vicinity of community gardens. For example, Kurtz (2001) observes that “[c]ommunity gardens are often intended to improve the social environment of children as well as adults” (658). Feminist geographers also acknowledge these benefits. For instance, see Jones et al. (1997).
- 11 Pudup (2008) explains her methodology: “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” (1232).
- 12 Pudup’s reference to “neoliberal governmentality” invokes Michel Foucault’s (1991) notion of governmentality introduced in his talk by the same name, which can be understood variously as the rational method behind governing, tactics to make citizens easier to govern and the historical process by which government power has flourished.
- 13 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” (172).
- 14 A nice example of the growth metaphor can be found in an early work on school gardens by M. Louise Greene (1910), in which she writes: “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” (18). Also, see Leo Marx (1964).

- 15 On the ambiguity in Dewey's notion of growth, see Ralston (2011).
- 16 During the First World War, the US Department of Education called the groups of children working in school gardens "the United States School Garden Army" and "soldiers of the soil" (Dupree 1986, 322; cited in Armitage 2009, 197). There is no evidence that Dewey believed school gardens should be employed as a form of war propaganda. His silence on the matter might have been due to the garden becoming a symbol of national unity and racial superiority in Germany during the early to mid-twentieth-century, eventually influencing the Nazi regime's blood and soil ideology. Some of these ideas made their way to the U.S. via Frank Albert Waugh, who had studied in Berlin under the scholar Willy Lange. Following Lange, Waugh (1917:175) declared that garden "styles are national—perhaps, more strictly speaking, racial" (175; cited by Wolshke-Bulmahn, 1999).
- 17 For empirical evidence of these benefits, see the study of community gardens in Toronto (Ontario, Canada) by Sarah Wakefield et al (2007), which concludes 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" (100).

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