

Renter’s and Their Gardens: Exploring Motivations, Rewards, and Methods of Private Gardening in Denver, Colorado

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Introduction

Gardening is a gestalt of culture, history, memory, environmental and individual health, connection, and community building and maintenance. For this reason, there is value in exploring how people engage with their available gardening spaces. Examining how different people interact with and perceive their gardens can provide pathways for future research into the benefits of, and motivation for, private urban gardens.

This qualitative research seeks to explore the relationship urban apartment renters have with their gardens, specifically the perceived motivations and benefits, as well as if and how they adapt their gardening practices for a space that they do not own. Using the participants’ history with gardening as a backdrop, I explore the meaning of urban apartment gardening on an individual level. Using the data gathered through interviews and autoethnography, key themes are identified as well as similarities and differences in experience and approach to gardening in the current setting, in addition to perceived benefits.

Methods

- I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with two of my neighbors. The interviews took place in the subjects’ respective homes. Here they felt most comfortable and were able to show me some of the results of their indoor cultivation. I recorded and then transcribed these interviews to achieve the highest accuracy regarding content and direct quotations. There is no intent to publish these recordings.
- I explored my research question from a personal perspective, conducting a succinct autoethnography with a focus on my experiences in my current living space. Using the same outlining questions I used as a guide when interviewing my neighbors, I recorded my answers and perspectives using both written and spoken methods. Journal entries were also consulted.

Data & Analysis

The Gardeners and their Gardens

- Gardening is a real hobby for Eve. “That’s why you always see me out there... I’m compelled to do it... I love it so much”. And it shows; her front garden and back stoop are always the most lush and healthy on the block. Overgrown and vining, she encourages a “controlled wild,” and noncurated aesthetic by scattering wildflower mixes and allowing the most attractive weeds to flourish.
- Jack took rock from a job site in the mountains to try and “zeroscape” his plot. He transplanted some hardy cacti from the same area. He incorporated bricks and pieces of scrap he had covered with glow-in-the-dark paint, using them as planters and to give his space dimension. This spring, Jack planted some of the cacti, succulents, and a fig sapling he had been cultivating indoors into his outdoor space. Following the first frost, he unearthed them from his garden, repotted them, and brought them inside for the winter.

	Length of Residency (months)	Occupation	Age (years)
Eve*	44	Hair Stylist	36
Jack*	10	Carpenter	29
Gillian	40	Student	28

* Names have been changed for privacy.

- My plot is a bit larger than the rest of my neighbors, but it sits underneath an invasive trees species *Ailanthus altissima* so it does not get much sun. At the north end, with the best sun, is a raised bed a friend made for me from scrap wood. Like Eve, I have found luck scattering local wildflower seeds like *Matthiola incana* and *Viola tricolor*.



A street view of the apartment block with the three gardens discussed outlined. Taken in 2019, this captures the block before Jack moved in. Photo courtesy of Google Maps.

Perceived Benefits of Gardening

“It’s so exciting when a cactus flowers. The more regular you are with them, the more comfortable they are. And that I think is the satisfaction, just knowing that you can have some regularity even though it’s just a plant.”
- Jack-



Instagram photo of Eve’s front garden this summer showing growth over a three-week period. (Personal photo).

“I love the satisfaction of it. It’s along the lines of my personality, like my job doing hair. It’s about getting that really satisfying before-and-after, seeing the process, getting through it, seeing things growing.”
-Eve-

Gardening in a Rented Space

Effects and Influence

- Low investment in in improving long-term soil quality
- Frustration with landlord interference
 - Hired landscapers
- Lack of control of external environmental factors
 - Unable to remove undesirable or invasive trees
- General inability to make large or lasting changes to property
 - Can’t install fence to protect garden from neighborhood dogs
- Rose bushes planted in verge ordered removed



Tomatoes growing in a grow box on the author’s back porch. 2019. (Personal photo).

“I’m a nurturing person by nature, like I’m a smothering person. And when I’m out there watering, overwatering, paying attention, yelling at dogs who are peeing, this is a part of my day to day. If I hadn’t been able to do that this summer, I would have gone extra crazy.”
-Eve-

Physically engaging with nature is a restorative force in my life. Simply putting my hands in the earth immediately calms my anxiety. The more mundane aspects of gardening like weeding or deadheading also help ease anxiety related compulsions by refocusing my energy on a repetitive, almost meditative, task. Being surrounded by green seems to nourish my soul.
-Gillian-



Jack’s indoor gardening setup at one of his previous residences. (Personal photo).



Jack’s indoor setup in the basement of his current residence. Some of the plants, such as the fig sapling and aloes, have moved with him, from place to place. (Personal photo).



In one of his closets, Jack has suspended a grow light from the clothes bar and has begun to grow tomato, carrot, and green beans from seed.

“It was totally an experiment. And that’s like half of what I do, you know no commitment experiments, so if they don’t work out I only b*tch about it minimally, but if they do work out, it’s like my prized possession.”
-Eve-

Methods for Navigating Lack of Ownership

- Avoidance of over-investment
- Cultivating potted plants and house plants for continuity
 - Use of grow lights
 - Moving plants from ground to pot and vice versa.
- Transfer of seeds when relocating
- Experimentation
 - Attempting to grow fruits and vegetables from the seeds of store-bought produce.
- Flexibility
 - Changing the types of plants grown in order to best suit plot conditions.
 - Changing the location of plants in response to environmental conditions.



The array of plants grown in pots on Eve’s front porch. This strategy avoids the area’s poor soil quality and gives her complete ownership over the plants themselves.

Discussion & Conclusion

- In terms of meaning and benefits of gardening, the results of this research support previous conclusions made by other garden researchers: that gardens are places in which people can showcase their individuality and creativity (Flachs), that often meaning is found in gardens through what is gained, either sensually or in production (Pope), and that gardening and time in nature has a positive impact on health (Buckley & Brough).
- Though not consciously recognized by any of the participants in the study, gardens serve to connect people to their community. The first conversations I had with both Jack and Eve revolved around our gardens, they literally and figuratively gave us a common ground. Additionally, working in the garden is very public, as the gardens run right up to the sidewalk, and so it is inevitable that you engage with others as they walk by-maybe just eye contact and a nod, maybe they stop and chat for a bit. Inevitably, certain people become familiar over time. Gardening is a way to get to know your neighbors.
- The renting gardeners in this study all employed similar techniques for mitigating lack of ownership and creating plant continuity despite relocation. Tempering emotional and financial investment (unaffected by length of residency), being flexible, and engaging in experimentation were common among all three gardeners. All three gardeners used potted plants and house plants to maintain consistency even when they move. Both Eve and Jack use grow lights to supplement house and potted plant growth.
- Future research might include a continued study of the residents of this block to increase the data set and gardener diversity.

References

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