



NO PLACE TO GROW

A documentary film by: Michelle Aguilar

Study Guide

Written by:

Michelle Glowa and Monika Egerer

A Brief History of the Beach Flats Community Garden

The Beach Flats Community Garden is a twenty five year old gem located in the Beach Flats neighborhood in the City of Santa Cruz, CA. The Beach Flats Community is a predominantly Latinx neighborhood with a long history of migration from Latin American countries such as Mexico and El Salvador. The Beach Flats is located behind the world famous Santa Cruz Boardwalk and next to the San Lorenzo River that runs adjacent to the Boardwalk. Tourist stores, restaurants, and motels surround the community. The sound of boardwalk rides and screams fill the air during the summer. The ocean breeze drifts into the neighborhood on early mornings. The Beach Flats community is impacted by densely packed substandard housing, high rents, and high car traffic due to its desirable location next to the beach and the boardwalk. Residents in the Beach Flats have limited open green space. The small amount of green and community space that exists in this neighborhood continues to be threatened by commercial development. The limited open space is comprised by small spaces such as Poet's Park, the Beach Flats Community Park, and the Beach Flats Community Garden. The amount of land present at all of these sites is disproportionate and less to green spaces in many neighboring communities. The Beach Flats Community Garden exists on property owned by the Seaside Company of Santa Cruz, which owns the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. Previously, the land the Garden currently occupies, functioned as a dumping ground. In 1994, a group of community members cleaned the space and created a community garden. Over the years dozens of gardeners have used the space, and currently there are about 25 gardeners. The Garden has for over twenty five years been an important space for youth education, food production, passing along agroecological practices, traditions, and knowledge from Mexican and Central American.



The Garden has gone through several iterations of programming, leadership, and relationship to the city. Yet gardener participation and garden cultivation has remained consistent. Several current gardeners have worked their plots for over 15 years. Further, the history of the Garden is also a story about histories of immigration, community organizing, alternative food movements, and changes in the Beach Flats neighborhood and city overall. It is about the relationship between humans and the earth. As one gardener stated: *"This garden is the only green area in the Beach Flats. We always come here with our friends. We enjoy the camaraderie. It is a place where we teach the younger generation how to live, how to grow corn and beans, to focus on something positive..., so they grow healthy and strong, with good values."*



Los Jardineros

Gardeners at the Beach Flats are predominantly from Mexico and El Salvador. Many come from the states of Oaxaca, Durango, Veracruz, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Mexico City, and other areas of Mexico and Latin America. Gardeners migrated to Santa Cruz because of work opportunities, family ties, and friends. Many of the gardeners work construction, landscaping, and handy work, food service industry, house cleaning, and janitorial work. The Garden is an important source of life for the jardineros and their families. Many of the Beach Flats residents' daily lives revolve around the Garden and its activities. After work, the jardineros go to the Garden to tend to their plants and also to meet and socialize with their friends from the community. The Garden is used as a social space that hosts birthday parties, cultural celebrations, and community fundraisers. The Garden is also a political space in the community, the center of marches, rallies, and community meetings. The Garden is important to the Latinx and Indigenous cultures that are represented in the Garden. The Garden is a space where the gardeners share their farming techniques and knowledge based on their customs and traditions. Many gardeners use seeds and crops from their home lands.

Effort to Save the Garden

In March 2015 gardeners received a letter from the Department of Parks and Recreation, the manager on paper for the last twenty years, stating in obscure language that the Seaside Company would be ending the current lease for the Garden in November of that year and there would be changes to come that would be described at a later date. Agroecology researchers from the University of Santa Cruz were the first non-gardeners to see the letter and informed former gardeners and advocates of the changes to come. The Coalition to Save the Beach Flat Garden formed and began organizing in mid-summer. As a multi-racial and cross-class coalition, the motivations of members have varied in why people have thought this Garden must be sustained. Some are concerned that the Seaside Company has too much power as a landlord of many properties in the Beach Flats and a major political player in the city, that has gotten away with too much and shouldn't be allowed to take back this land. Others see the Garden as an important space of cultural expression and agency in a neighborhood marginalized and invisibilized by the discourse of Santa Cruz as progressive oasis. Many connect the food production not just to meeting immediate food needs but to international movements for food sovereignty, highlighting these farmers' knowledges and the Garden as an example of the kind of

agricultural alternatives we need to create to contemporary industrial food systems. Community members from across Santa Cruz reached out to city officials, organized educational events, collected over 4000 petition signatures, mobilized marches and opportunities to speak out for the Garden. As a result of their activities, the Garden gained significant local media coverage as well as movement from the landlord's original offer to relocate 95% of the Garden to a smaller plot. The Seaside Company then offered to lease 60% of the current garden for three years. Advocates would still like to see the entire garden protected in perpetuity. As a result of community advocacy, the City Council approved a proposal in October 2015 to try to buy the current garden land, but the short-term future of the Garden is uncertain. On a March morning in 2016, the City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department made what was later described as an unfortunate mistake. City workers arrived at the site with a bulldozer and demolished part of the Beach Flats Garden, readying the land to return to its owner. Mature peach, lemon and avocado trees were torn from their roots. Rows of nopal plants and chayote vines destroyed. The City Parks and Recreation Director claimed that it was a miscommunication between staff, as he recalled the promise made to gardeners to help transplant

any plants that would have to be moved. Yet for gardeners who tried to stop the destruction and were ignored by the staff who said they had their orders, this was hard to believe. After the dust (or long cultivated soil) had settled, the City agreed to replace the plants they had destroyed. Some of these trees had taken many years to become mature enough to give fruits and it would be many years before any new trees would be raised to their level of abundance and productivity. One gardener, Federico, wondered where he would even plant these new trees in the now smaller space of the Garden and if it would be worth the effort given that he does not know the future of the space. He had wanted to move his trees, which he had cultivated from seed, to his son's house. Now, however, without a choice he instead wanted the City to offer him monetary compensation. Federico passed away eight months after the loss of his trees, still waiting for the city to repay the damage. (This is a passage from Glowa, Egerer, and Jones 2018



What Grows in the Jardin

Gardeners grow according to traditional seasonal accordance with organic methods. They grow crops based on what they have learned grows well in the space. In the Fall they plant crops such as cilantro, cabbage, onions, garlic, and squash. The gardeners tend not to plant in the Winter season due to weather conditions. In Spring and Summer they plant again, crops such as fava beans, marigolds, broccoli, brussel sprouts, corn, and beans. Native seeds for beans and corn are brought to the Garden from Mexico and El Salvador. Many gardeners use a cropping system of corn, beans, and sometimes squash. This farming system is called a Milpa throughout much of Mexico and Central America, or the “three sisters” in English. The crops are then used by the jardineros, their friends, and their families. Corn is roasted on the fire and eaten sweet, and beans are cooked into many traditional dishes. Cilantro, onions, and garlic are used to flavor foods and garden chiles add spice to meals.

Growing methods used in the Garden vary depending on the country and region of the gardeners. Some gardeners from El Salvador report learning to integrate plant matter in their plots to increase soil fertility. Mexicans and Salvadorans have differing methods of corn and bean cultivation, some integrate them together and some plant them side by side.



The Local Environment and the Garden

The Garden provides an essential green space in the Beach Flats community, supporting the physical and mental well-being of the neighborhood. In a community that is surrounded by car traffic during the summer months, the Garden provides an important space of some fresh air. Several fruit and larger trees on site are estimated to absorb between 13-48 pounds of carbon dioxide per year as well as capturing particulate matter from exhaust. In addition, the tree and plant canopies lower local air temperatures. Gardeners note temperatures are cooler in the Garden. Research by the USDA Forest Service notes urban trees can play a significant role in reducing urban heat storage including individual and small groups of trees (Nowak 2002). In addition, “reduced air temperature due to trees can improve air quality because the emission of many pollutants and/or ozone-forming chemicals are temperature dependent” (Nowak 2002). In addition to the physical benefits of reduced heat and air pollution, residents benefit from the Garden as a space that can create an atmosphere of calm and mental restoration. Research has demonstrated the necessity for green space as a way to improve brain function by providing cognitive breaks from the stimuli and exhaustion of urban features (Berman et al. 2008). In addition to the environmental health benefits, the Garden is an important ecological site.

The Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS) Director and UCSC professor, Stacy Philpott identifies the Garden as an important site for arthropod diversity conservation (Otoshi et al. 2015). The study states, “urbanization is a major threat to arthropod biodiversity and abundance due to reduction and loss of suitable natural habitat”, and yet gardens can provide needed habitat for spiders that perform important pest control functions in the city. In addition, Philpott’s research team has found a high degree of bee and ladybug diversity in the gardens they sample, including the Beach Flats Garden, with over 60 different bee species and 17 ladybug species found. Researchers think the presence and protection of bee diversity in gardens may be significant given the important function bees play in plant pollination and the recent concerns over potentially devastating impacts of colony collapse disorder on local agriculture. In the Beach Flats residents are exposed to foot and car traffic as well as living in the densest neighborhood in Santa Cruz. With only one other park, which is almost entirely playground and concrete, the Garden serves as the community’s only access to restorative green space. According to the 2011 City of Santa Cruz General Plan, “The City’s standard is to provide neighborhood parks at a ratio of 2.0 acres per 1,000 people.” Currently the Beach Flats has a population of over 1000 residents and the community has one park, the Beach Flats Park of approximately ¼ acre, and one community garden of approximately .5 acres. By city standards, Beach Flats is underserved with regards to access to parks and green space. The Garden plays an important role as a community park in this underserved context. The Garden is highlighted as the space many residents come to relax after work, spend time with friends on the weekend, and use as a social gathering space for family occasions.



Discussion Questions:

Should cities require that communities have community gardens?

How do community gardens benefit the community?

Is it important for a densely populated neighborhood to have an open space that is communal? What roles might gardens play as climate change impacts our communities?

Where does your food come from?

And do you know under what environmental and labor conditions it was grown?

How did immigration influence the food landscape of the garden?

What farming traditions come from your family or cultures? What role does this garden play in the social environment of Beach Flats?

Why do people believe the Garden is important in the Santa Cruz community?



Additional Information:

Beachflatsgarden.org

<https://vimeo.com/139610416>

<http://blindfieldjournal.com/2015/12/08/elotes-and-eviction-snapshot-perspectives-from-youth-on-the-beach-flats-community-garden/>



Rescources:

Berman, M.G., J. Jonides, and S. Kaplan. 2008. The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting with Nature. *Psychological Science* 19, 12: 1207-212.

K. Michelle Glowa, Monika Egerer & Vicki Jones (2018): Agroecologies of displacement: a study of land access, dislocation, and migration in relation to sustainable food production in the Beach Flats Community Garden, *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, DOI: 10.1080/21683565.2018.1515143

Glowa, M., Lopez, L. and Chaput, K. (2015) "Elotes and Eviction: Snapshot Perspectives from Youth on the Beach Flats Community Garden". *Blind Field Journal*. November, 2015.

Otoshi MD*, Bichier P, Philpott SM. (2015) Local and landscape correlates of spider activity density and richness in urban gardens. *Environmental Entomology*

Rafael Pérez-Escamilla. "Dietary Quality among Latinos: Is Acculturation Making us Sick?" *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2009 June ; 109(6): 988–991. doi:10.1016/j.jada.2009.03.014.