



# Motivations and practices of gardeners in urban collective gardens: The case of Montpellier



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## ABSTRACT

As cities and city dwellers in developed countries have shown increasing interest in agriculture, collective gardens (defined as opposed to individual back-yard gardens) have multiplied. Their increase in the city of Montpellier reflects both a demand among citizens and the support of the municipality, and in this article we address the bridge they create between city and agriculture. Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted in different municipal collective gardens to investigate the gardeners' motivations, their agricultural practices, and their views on gardening and farming. We identified an interest in reconnecting with farming even when food production is not a priority, and our results suggest that this expansion of cultivation promoted by city dwellers supports a new link between cities and agriculture that could be significant in the construction of a sustainable and fertile city.

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## Introduction

As community food production increases in popularity everywhere in the world, and as agriculture is “reinterpreted” inside cities (Torreggiani et al., 2012), collective gardens, plots of land or groups of plots cultivated by a set of gardeners, are appearing in increasing number in cities of developed countries. In France, they constitute two categories with different origins that fall under the common terms of “family gardens” (allotments), and “shared gardens” (community gardens). Family gardens appeared in French cities in the 19th century in a spirit of social Catholicism, during the migration of populations from rural to urban areas. They were created to allow urban workers to cultivate a piece of land and to help in the struggle against alcoholism (Dubost, 1997). Although popular during periods of crisis, such as the 20th century world wars, their number and their food dimension decreased during the following decades in all parts of the world (Monediaire, 1999; Pudup, 2008). After the second world war, the status and functions of these gardens evolved. They acquired an aspect of green and leisure space, but often became the victim of urbanization as observed in the US (Schmelzkopf, 1995; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). The creation and protection of collective gardens has been encouraged since 1976 in France by measures giving local governments and a national agency charged with managing agricultural spaces

the authority to use a right of eminent domain to acquire land and create gardens, and to ensure provisions for equivalent plots in cases of the expropriation of existing gardens. In 1997, the first French gardening forum affirms the role of collective gardens in social relationships, their link to nature, and their environmental value. The forum particularly emphasizes their importance in maintaining the living environment, and makes note of the examples of North American community gardens and the appropriation by the city-dwellers of vacant spaces in New York. Subsequently, the first “shared garden” is created in Lille (Pashchenko and Consales, 2010), and during the 2000s, this new species of gardens proliferates. The French shared garden, as a more recent concept than that of family gardens, is a child of the North American community garden, and is designed, built, and cultivated by local inhabitants who are often organized as an association. These gardens are based on solidarity and conviviality values, and on the shared links between generations and cultures. They are spaces convenient to the organization of events and workshops based on the various aspects of gardening. And today, they are multiplying in numerous French cities.

French family gardens are governed by the French rural code: they are defined as “land divided into allocated plots by territorial authorities or by gardening associations for private individuals practicing gardening for their own needs and those of their family, with no commercial application” (definition outcoming of the private bill adopted in July 2nd, 2012 by the senate). Shared gardens are “gardens created or organized collectively, open to all citizens for the purpose of developing local social links through social, cultural, or educational activities” (definition outcoming of the private bill adopted in July 14th, 2007 by the national assembly).

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Collective gardens involve different types of actors mobilized around their creation and their management: local authorities, public or private enterprises, associations, city-dwellers. Thus they exist at the confluence between grass-roots movements, urban planning, and environmental policies. Beyond the production of food, these gardens provide social, therapeutic, environmental, urban planning, and living environment functions, a characteristic that has been observed in cities all around the world (Armstrong, 2000; Salvidar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004; Wegmuller and Duchemin, 2010; Agustina and Beilin, 2012; Adevi and Martensson, 2013). With the strength of their social roles and their multifunctionality, municipalities are making efforts to integrate them into their planning policies to provide inhabitants with recreational facilities that foster social ties, social diversity, and intergenerational relationships.

Community gardens are particularly well documented in the United States, where the subject of food security is prompting new interest (Corrigan, 2011; Guitard et al., 2012; Hoover and College, 2013; Smith et al., 2013); the concepts of food and social justice are being used to study the question of these gardens in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Ottmann et al., 2012; Paddeu, 2012; Shepard, 2014), along with the role of the community gardens in building good citizenship (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014). In France, scientific studies about collective gardens are not as common, and they tend to focus on social functions (Dubost, 1997; Guyon, 2008; Cerezuelle and Roustang, 2010). Some works are in progress studying production functions of Parisian collective gardens (Pourias et al., 2013). Collective gardens could be indeed considered like laboratories for urban agriculture (Consales, 2004).

In this paper we propose the hypothesis that collective gardens represent interfacial spaces between nature and agriculture, where urban dwellers are renewing and redefining their relationship with agriculture. How do the collective gardens contribute to reconnect the citizens with nature and agriculture, to recreate a link with the production of food as cities come face to face with an increasing dependence on external food supplies? We approach this question by examining the perceptions and agronomic practices of the gardeners.

Our exploratory case study focuses on Montpellier's municipal collective gardens, whose numbers have increased rapidly in the past few years. These collective gardens, very much in demand by the citizens of Montpellier and reflecting an escalating interest in gardening, offer a rich field of study of the motivations of these urban gardeners and their agronomic practices. The motivations and practices of the gardeners, and their characterization of agriculture, were studied through the analysis of comprehensive interviews realized in 9 collective gardens (3 family gardens and 6 shared gardens). What sort of incentives does the gardener have to work in his garden? Does he cultivate the land for food? What other aspirations come into play? What are his gardening practices? And how are the answers to these questions linked to his views on gardening and agriculture?

## Material and methods

### A case study

Montpellier, with 258,000 inhabitants, is the 8th largest city in France, but it is a city without a real tradition of collective gardening. Contrary to the case of cities in the North of France where family gardens are an inheritance of the industrial past, these gardens seem to have been rarely developed along the arc of the Mediterranean's Gulf of Lion (Consales, 2003). But in the last few years, there has been a rapid expansion of the number of collective gardens in Montpellier: In 2004 the municipality committed to a

program creating collective gardens within the framework of its biodiversity protection strategy (Scheromm, 2013).

The family gardens are primarily intended to give "landless" families an opportunity to participate in the practices of cultivation, but the municipality makes no express reference to a food stake. The gardeners, who are selected through a lottery system, must live in Montpellier and must not have access to a private garden, thus implying that the location of the garden is not associated with the gardener's residence. The municipality considers shared gardens as places where residents can socialize in a friendly atmosphere that fosters interaction between a mix of generations and social groups; their creation is often the fruit of a partnership with a social or civil partner, a district committee, or even a retirement home.

In parallel with the creation of collective gardens, and through the framework of its biodiversity conservation strategy, the municipality has set up environmental education programs that offer workshops on subjects like organic gardening. In family gardens, the charter signed by the gardeners stipulates that the use of the phytosanitary products must be "in accordance with the regulations in force". For shared gardens, it recommends an ecological management of the site, a reasonable avoidance of chemical products, the use of water saving techniques, and the selection of crops adapted to soil and climate. By outlining this set of technical requirements for gardeners, the municipality becomes involved in both the definition of "good agricultural practices" and advice for their implementation.

The family gardens include approximately 160 gardeners and each of the shared gardens count between 10 and 30 gardeners. For both types of gardens, the demand is more important than the supply. There are approximately 350 people on a waiting list for the family gardens. Shared gardens vary in popularity, with some having space for most requests while others have a waiting list of up to 35 people. These figures illustrate the demand for collective gardens in Montpellier.

### Surveys based on in-depth interviews

Forty comprehensive surveys fostering flexible and reflective conversations were conducted with the gardeners between November, 2012 and July, 2013. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, ranging from 40 to 90 min.

The gardeners were approached directly in the gardens in order to observe their gestures as they speak about their agronomic practices. The interviews were realized toward the end of the day, during the weekend, or on school holidays to have the opportunity to meet people practicing a professional activity.

We interviewed 20 gardeners in the three family gardens managed by the municipality and 20 gardeners in seven of its shared gardens (Fig. 1). Gardens were chosen for their strong record of attendance by gardeners and the opportunities to encounter them in the garden. They correspond to those gardens described as "dynamic" by the municipality. In the shared gardens, a maximum of three people were interviewed in each garden in order to avoid stressing strong specificities of gardens (two gardens in disadvantaged neighborhoods, one permaculture garden). Gardeners were interviewed in various municipal gardens in an effort to maintain a heterogeneous sample of gardeners, enabling the observation of their diversity. The aim of this study is indeed not to observe the diversity of the gardens, but to assess the diversity of the gardeners and their practices.

The objective of the interviews was to understand the profile of these urban gardeners, their motivations, their agronomic practices, their links with agriculture, and the effect on their purchasing behavior concerning fruits and vegetables. The diversity among gardeners was categorized by the typology of their responses

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