Food Deserts, Libraries, and Urban Communities: What Is the Connection?

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ABSTRACT

What do public libraries and communities classified as food deserts have in common? This paper will share how the Cleveland Public Library addressed food security issues in Cleveland, Ohio, through collaboration with local organizations such as The Ohio State University (OSU) Extension in Cuyahoga County and the Cuyahoga County Land Bank (CCLB). Public Libraries are changing the way they serve patrons in disadvantaged communities. Librarians are beginning to share concerns about health issues of their communities. The author provides a step-by-step approach to beginning a community garden at your local public library or community property. The program will benefit groups of all ages.

Introduction

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) defines food deserts as “locations without easy access to fresh, healthy, and affordable foods”. (United States Department of Agriculture. National Institute of Food and Agriculture 2016)) Historically, public libraries have served their communities primarily by targeting the educational needs of their constituents. Libraries are entities that not only provide information to its citizens but are also becoming institutions that are meeting the societal needs of their perspective communities. They are actively becoming extensions of community-based programs that local government and nonprofit organizations offer. In urban areas heavily dominated by African Americans, Latinos, or other peoples of color, libraries are addressing the health issues relevant to this population demographic, by opening its doors to community and grass root organizations that address these concerns. One of these issues is food deserts that are abundant in urban areas where libraries have been pillars and anchors. As a result, libraries are initiating and maintaining community-based gardening programs at their local sites as well as offsite in their communities.
The Cleveland Public Library (CPL) is one institution that formally addressed the needs of its users living in food-insecure communities. The 150 year old institution consists of 28 branches throughout urban Cleveland OH (Cleveland Public Library 2019). The staff collaborated with two other institutions in order to address the food desert dilemma: The first was The OSU Extension, an academic institution, staffed with expertise related to quality food growth and production. One of their impact areas is Sustainable Food Systems described below:

A sustainable food system benefits producers, protects the environment, and feeds a growing world population. Meanwhile, changing consumer preferences continually influence the type of products that producers are expected to bring to market. OSU Extension brings science-based information to the process of making decisions about food and the way it is produced, processed, distributed, stored, prepared and consumed (OSU Extension 2019).

The second institution was the Cuyahoga County Land Bank (CCLB), “a separate non-profit, government purposed entity” (Cuyahoga County Land Bank 2018) which dealt with abandon property and land within challenging communities. Three of their five responsibilities are:

1. Strategically acquire blighted properties.
2. Return them to productive use through
   a. Rehabilitation
   b. Sale to new private owners
   c. Demolition
   d. Preparation for traditional economic development
   e. Creative reuse such as gardening, green space, storm water management.
   f. Or other innovative and ecological purposes.
3. Increase property values through these efforts” (Cuyahoga County Land Bank 2018).

Both institutions are located in Cuyahoga County, where all CPL branches are situated.

**Literature review**

Over the past fifty years, many articles have been published describing how city planners and architects integrated gardening into community landscaping and new constructions. They were published in journals like Environment, Journal of the American Planning Association, and Geographical Review. When reviewing the body of work in the area of public libraries and
gardening programs, I found very little information documenting collaborations between public libraries and community organizations.

One of the most important was written by Sarah Feldstein, which provided three examples “in order to convey the range of possibilities these collaborations can engender.” Feldstein described programs in Solon Iowa (small farming community), Seattle Washington (a large community, with multi-branch system), and New York, New York (an even larger system, with more than 50 gardens at the time of publication). Like many collaborations, these were successful because they were solutions to library budgetary and staff limitations and the need to provide relevant community outreach to address the challenges of the environment (including tranquil and beautiful spaces) and sustainable agricultural (Feldstein 1996). More than 20 years later, there is still the challenge to bring fresh fruits and vegetables into poorer, underserved communities – where many public libraries reside.

According to the Institution of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), there are a total of 9,070 public library systems within the United States (IMLS 2017). Some of these libraries can provide valuable resources and programming to support economically-challenged communities later called food desert areas.

The term is used in agriculture, health and library articles and reports. Beaulac and Cummins address the relationship between those who live in food deserts and the rise in chronic diseases because of less access healthy affordable food (Beaulac, Kristijansson, and Cummins 2009). In addition, Cummins completed a quantitative analysis and found that areas classified as food deserts suffered many health issues around cardiovascular disease and obesity (Cummins 2007). Within the last ten years, Congress has recently narrowed down food desert communities to areas where “fringe” foods are easily accessible (Pobutsky, Bradbury, and Miller 2011). Fringe foods have become a part of a coding category for researchers, meaning a community with an imbalance of fast food restaurants and convenience stores (Mari Gallagher Research and Consulting Group 2014).

The literature documents the overall health benefits of community gardening collaborations. In their report on partnerships between government and library, Jaeger et al points out the benefits in the area of health education. Their study indicates that, by planting a garden on library grounds or within the library community, library staff and patrons can address the health disparities that plague a food desert community (Jaeger et al. 2012). The Gallagher Group agrees on the negative effects of poverty on children’s health (e.g. obesity). For the children’s librarians and youth educators, there is considerable research to support a proposal for youth participation. Authors address both the negative and positive effects.

McArthur et al and Jaeger et al continue the discussion on the social aspect of children who may not enjoy various activities outside of the home.
McArthur et al. found that children and youth involved in nature programs show improvements in behavior, grades and interest in the environment (McArthur et al. 2010). While Jaeger et al focuses on the life of even more at-risk children. Some children have one or more parent incarcerated, leaving children and youth left alone with older caregivers to take care of them. These particular children who live in urban communities generally have no access to the internet or a computer at home (Jaeger et al. 2012). A qualitative and interview study was conducted on a focus group of youth, ages 11 to 14. The students resided in disenfranchised urban communities. The study revealed that physical activities and nature-based programs can improve students’ outlook pertaining to life skills. The study also reported that students enjoyed nature activities. They often related to the outdoors—observing insects, along with playing in the soil, hiking, camping and fishing (Blanton et al. 2013).

To this point, Loven brings to the discussion research on how community gardening can curtail juvenile delinquency. In most areas where resources are slim to none juvenile- delinquency is at an all-time high. Therapeutic gardening has been observed to impact youth behaviors in a positive way. A retired probation officer in Norfolk Virginia, started a gardening initiative named Horticulture Enrichment Learning Program (HELP). The program teamed up with the juvenile court system and the Chesapeake Arboretum, to have youth who encountered the court system to be routed to the HELP program instead of juvenile detention centers for a way of paying their debt to society for unruly behaviors. The program has witnessed the changes in the youth attitudes, their outlook and total overall mindsets to a more positive experience (Loven 2006).

Community gardens help to educate and raise the awareness of healthy eating and sustainability. Libraries in urban areas can turn information literacy programs into gardening activities for youth and children in the community (Kallunki 2015). These type of nature programs expands the vocabulary of children and young adults and their awareness about their environment. Most underserved populations live within food deserts (Pobutsky, Bradbury, and Miller 2011). Most food deserts are centrally located within communities with a public library location (Institute of Museum and Library Services 2017).

Libraries can play a major role with children and youth who are at risk, by providing nature- based gardening programs. Nature programs have been proven to improve children’s outlook and behaviors where they begin to better their communities and the environments (Blanton et al. 2013). Children who live in areas that lack the financial support due to budget cuts in the community or other governmental factors suffer from obesity and other health issues affecting them (Mari Gallagher Research and Consulting Group 2014).
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Libraries today are in what is called a sweet spot where they can contribute to making an environment more open to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Librarians who work in communities that are underrepresented. That is, those which lack information and resources to uplift and inspire them, can utilize their library institutions to connect with their patrons through cultural programs and sustainable resources (Hill 2017).

The American Library Association (ALA) has recently addressed underserved communities in their strategic plan (American Library Association 2017). Librarians who work in economically-challenged communities can begin to understand what it means to have an EDI viewpoint in order to address the needs of the community through their library programming and outreach services (McManus 2017).

Similarly, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of ALA, has recently revised its core values in addressing underrepresented populations. In 2016, ACRL Diversity Alliance was created to enhance other EDI awareness within its organization. This is an excellent milestone for our libraries’ leadership to embrace more social justice concerns amongst its members and students they serve. When conversations about EDI lead to awareness and eventually bridge the gap further to eventually seeing EDI reflected in libraries’ mission statements. Libraries can begin to make a difference in addressing the needs of their constituents either at the library or within the community (Association of College Research Libraries 2018).

The Public Library Associations (PLA), a division of ALA, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Task Force recently emphasized public libraries’ role in the twenty-first century as a place for patrons to learn and grow (Public Library Association 2019). Initiatives such as community gardens and educational programs relating to healthy eating can be part of libraries programming and outreach goals to meet the needs of underserved communities.

Libraries are breaking grounds in the twenty-first century by becoming innovative in their approach to outreach and programming. Research by Lewis indicates that libraries are supporting their patrons by creating gardens at their institutions (Lewis 2014). An excellent example is the work of Anythink Libraries in Colorado. They have been on a mission to shift library paradigms towards helping to alleviate patron’s food insecurities. This work was made possible after being awarded a $10.5 million grant funded by the
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Communities Putting Prevention to Work initiative (Anythink 2011). The resulting programming will allow the patrons from the Anythink Libraries to sign up for plots for the growing season. Anythink Libraries will provide gardening classes, cooking classes, and other nutritional programs.

Gardening literature includes the use of raised beds when in-ground planting may not be feasible. Westbank Libraries in Texas provides 8′x 8′ raised beds to its community members for gardening, with children being allowed to work in the soil in a 1′x 6′ raised bed. This system has incorporated other additions into its community garden for its patrons, such as a lemon tree, rain barrels and a bee hive to harvest honey (Westbank Libraries 2018). This is evidence of how libraries are expanding ways to engage their communities.

At the Berkeley County Library System in South Carolina, their Community Garden Springs at the Sangaree Branch is addressing its community needs by detouring teens from delinquent behavior and getting them involved with the building process of raise beds at the library and growing foods. The Sangaree Branch received a grant from Home Depot. In addition, they received a special tax in their district to help assist with the costs of gardening (Berkeley County Library System 2015).

Berry’s research highlights the work of the Living Library. Colorado’s Pine River Library has been nominated as the Best Small Library according to Library Journal in 2014. Its community members built their library from volunteers who wanted to see a library within their community that provided programs that were relevant to its citizens. The Living Library was added on grounds that covers 17,000 square footage of outdoor space that holds 24 raise beds for growing food. This Living Library has truly utilized its small outdoor space by adding a fruit orchard and a greenhouse to its grounds. The library also teaches gardening classes, food preparation, canning and creative recipes from what grows in the garden (Berry 2014).

While academic and special libraries are primarily viewed as our research institutions, it is imperative that we keep current to the needs of our patrons. Public Health research provides evidence that gardening can improve a larger consumption of produce, reduce stress levels, build partnerships within the communities, provide physical activities, and a whole host of positive benefits (Shostak and Guscott 2017).

Community gardens, organized by staff, provide a platform to discover, and engage with its community members broadly. Creating an area to observe the environment, by sharing programs that have a broader impact, and an overall investment in the community. Gardening at libraries can empower its patrons to grow their own foods (Gateway Greening 2016).

Research also indicates that gardening ideas need not be centered on growing food only. Instead, the focus can include pollinators, which help
with our produce to provide a great taste. At the Princeton Library in Illinois, that is exactly what they are doing, preparing a resting stop for monarch butterflies. This is a great way for the community to learn about pollinators and to witness nature in action. Although it is not a produce garden it does help our insects needed to grow delicious food (United States Department of Agriculture 2015).

Washington State Library is another great institution that is advocating for better hands-on programming using gardening as a means to promote literacy through reading and writing. They are educating patrons by sharing literature on what qualifies as organically-grown food, what is a genetically modified organism (GMO), and educating users on what food is healthy (Washington State Library 2016).

Libraries that do not have the growing space can provide support to their patrons in other ways, such as providing seeds for home gardens. Many libraries are taking on this charge to provide access to seeds for their own personal gardening adventure (Breitkopf 2012). Seed libraries can fulfill many roles that librarianship embraces, such as social justice, engagement with the community, providing access to information, along with the encouragement for community members to continue lifelong learning. Libraries today provide seeds to its patrons and can be an anchor for its community members who live within food insecure communities. Libraries are changing the course of community engagement by providing access to seeds (Peekhaus 2018).

Libraries are the center of communities where the people gather. Providing programs like a gardening program, can be broadened to include information about business practices and models around food distribution, allow for users to learn life skills, and small business practices related to food production (Leavitt, Pennell, and Fails 2010).

Libraries can connect and network with other libraries on food desert issues by learning and sharing their programming, and outreach engagement with its constituents on gardening, preservation, food preparation, cooking and other survival skills through the Webjunction. A place for public library institutions to connect and collaborate with other libraries working on the same goals alleviating hunger in their community one library at a time (Peterson 2016).

When reflecting upon research published over the past two decades, we can appreciate the unwavering mission of our public libraries to support the community and people as leaders, partners, and facilitators. In addition to research submitted by librarians, there are reports at the local and national levels of government which show a commitment to decreasing food deserts and increasing healthy lifestyles. No doubt these findings will be welcomed across disciplines- agriculture, medicine, psychology, sociology- as well as parenting and senior well-being.
Getting started on how public libraries can tackle food deserts in their communities

Public libraries that serve patrons who live within food deserts are now redefining their services by addressing the need for available, healthy food. One is educating patrons on how to obtain and sustain healthy food choices. Another is by targeting food deserts within their communities.

The Summer Sprout Program assisted CPL with obtaining a license to garden on the land, through the Cuyahoga County Land Bank (CCLB). A $125.00 fee was paid to use the city’s fire hydrant to water the garden during the growing season. The Urban Farmer provides an online vegetable planting calendar for zones within the U.S. (Urban Farmer 2019). Once the CCLB verified that the city had not designated the proposed land for future use, they granted a license to begin the community garden.

The library distributed flyers within the community to inform its members that a garden was in the planning stage and the project needed volunteers. Twelve volunteers from the community assisted with the maintenance, evening watering, weeding, and overall sustaining of the garden when the library was closed (See Figure 1).

Senior citizens, some of who had stated they were not frequent CPL users, were thrilled about the garden. In fact, they eventually became the primary tenders of the garden. The teenagers also responded to the call, as well as the elementary students—all who appeared to feel a connection to the project coming to their community. Their connection appeared to be a natural childhood favorite: playing in the dirt. Many children stated the garden has opened their minds about so many things to eat. One student commented on the garden looking like a rainbow. Children witnessed the growth of arm length

![Figure 1. Local community member planting seeds for library garden program within walking distance of the East 131st street branch of Cleveland public library Permanent Parcel No. 138–09-063.](image)
sized squash, and zucchini. One student was particularly surprised that the garden’s strawberries were much smaller than those found in grocery stores.

During the harvest, at the end of the summer, volunteers bagged up a variety of vegetables for the youth and elementary students to take home and share with their families. Students still needed to learn how to break off some of the vegetables to allow for another harvest from that particular plant (See Figure 2).

Throughout the gardening experience, students mentioned they had never eaten so many vegetables. Kale and micro-greens were grown and sprouted often. Students stated how they enjoyed placing the micro-greens and kale on their sandwiches as lettuce. The garden program lasted the entire 2017 growing season.

When considering a garden program at your local library, it is important to gain the support of library administration as well as community advocates. The steps suggested below are not necessarily in the order that is best for your environment. Step 1: Obtain confirmation that your community meets the definition for “food desert” as described by the USDA/NIFA. This information should be available from your local government land bank or urban development agency. It may also be available in your library’s annual report. Step 2: Publish data from articles and reports to support your proposal for growing food in the community. Be sure to include profiles, recent proposals, and success stories from other libraries. Step 3: Gather local data to show the community’s nearest grocery store. Keep a journal on the many stories you hear regarding patron cardiovascular issues—as well as child obesity concerns. Step 4: Gather patron input by surveying members of the community for at least one week. It may be a good idea to let the children’s librarian survey the youth separately, to ensure good participation from this important group. Step 5: Be prepared to advocate and be the voice for your community. A more detailed “Tip Sheet” with steps from start to finish, is included here (See Appendix).

Figure 2. Youth enjoying the vegetables harvest at the Cleveland public library garden site located near 131st Branch Permanent Parcel No. 138–09-063.
Conclusion

Public library gardening programs may not eliminate food desert or food insecurity within communities. However, by contributing towards a solution, the library staff and programs may spark others in the community to plan and implement a garden program. Gardening need not have to be done on a massive scale. A simple garden space inside the library can be adequate and effective. Senior citizens and/or students can be primary candidates for maintaining the garden, while the library continue to oversee overall administration and programming. In time, responsibility and accountability for the actual garden could shift away from library staff altogether. Be sure to partner with local agencies to provide an educational component to your program. When possible, delegate the task of conducting workshops on the need for growing one’s own food, especially in areas designated as food deserts. Keep plenty of handouts, providing quick tips, statistics, and upcoming workshops, to update and educate the community. This will build better relationships with community members, who will feel a sense of connection to the library, as well as other health-food-related agencies, and institutions in their areas.

As the gardening program moves forward, many of your patrons will benefit from health literacy, physical exercise, and stress relief. There will be positive effects specific to youth. For example improving physical and balancing skills, locomotor skills, as well as many different manipulative skills when watering the garden, planting, and picking vegetables. Gardening programs can also help with cardiovascular issues, especially amongst senior citizens by allowing them low-impact exercise. Overall, gardening is a great way to get everyone outside for fresh air and exercise. Then they can come back inside the library for the educational support!

Notes on contributor

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Appendix  Tips for a Successful Library Gardening Program

- Identify available public land near library.
- Write proposal for administrative approval.
- Contact nearest university extension center for programming and training.
- Collaborate with your local area land bank for plots of land not designated for commercial use.
- Test the soil. With the assistance of the extension center or purchase a soil-testing kit.
- Prepare to plant on raised beds if in-ground planted is not an option.
- Communicate with the community about the garden program.
• Roll out a “call for volunteers” campaign, first at the community meeting, then distribute flyers to community senior citizen groups, centers of faith, and schools.
• Use verbal or written survey to gage interest. Two weeks minimum.
• Sign-up/schedule volunteers for watering, weeding, and trash pick-up. Minimum of five people each time, more for larger plots. Be mindful of safety.
• Request tilling services through the extension center. If not available, rent machine from a local garden nursery or hire a tiller, if necessary.
• Seek grant support.
• Schedule a "Planting Day" after tilling. Include a “rain date.”
• Purchase gardening tools to distribute and collect at each outing. Encourage volunteers to bring their own when possible.
• Provide water and light snacks during initial planting. Encourage volunteers to bring their own at each outing. For seniors and children, refreshments may be very important.
• Plan ways to distribute produce. (e.g., giveaway table/bags in library, a harvest party, delivery to homebound).
• Maintain photo/video history for library and community press releases, newsletters and branch displays. Remember release permission slips.
• Schedule debriefing meeting(s) to record “lessons learned” and plan for the next season. This can also be a component of recognition program.
• Schedule a recognition program for community partners and participants.