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York St John University

**LIVING
LAB:**

Exploring the Barriers and Benefits of Community Gardening using Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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What is community gardening?

Community gardening involves shared spaces where individuals collaborate to cultivate plants, often including vegetables, fruits and flowers, (Nettle, 2016). This activity fosters a sense of community, encourages teamwork, and offers opportunities for hands-on learning and environmental stewardship. For York St John University students, participating in community gardening can enhance their university experience by providing a practical outlet for stress relief, skill development and social interaction. The benefits of community gardening are multifaceted. Physically it promotes a healthy lifestyle by providing regular physical activity. Mentally, it serves as a therapeutic escape from academic pressures, contributing to improved mental health and well-being, (Wood et al., 2022). Socially, it fosters a sense of community, building relationships among students from diverse backgrounds. Environmentally, community gardens support sustainability by promoting local food production, reducing carbon footprints and enhancing biodiversity, (Okvat & Zautra, 2011).

Despite its benefits, community gardening encounters several challenges. Common issues include securing consistent funding, managing volunteer participation, and maintaining the garden over time. Limited space and resources can also hinder the establishment and growth of community gardens. Addressing these challenges requires effective planning, community involvement and institutional support to ensure the sustainability and success of garden initiatives, (Fox-Kämper et al., 2018).

Cultivating community and spaces at York St John University

York St John University offers community gardening opportunities primarily through ‘Wild Wednesdays’, a weekly two-hour session organised by the University estates team. During 2023-2024, the University’s Living Lab initiative, which focuses on ecological justice, shifted its attention to enhancing the campus food system and creating more green spaces. The Estates team has long aimed to involve students in gardening, a goal that students themselves supported in discussions at Living Lab meetings. To strengthen student involvement, the Living Lab hired a paid Student Volunteer Coordinator to boost outreach by collaborating with groups like Wellbeing and Student Finance. As a result, a dedicated student group now gathers every week for three hours, working on tasks such as planting vegetables, and fruit trees, weeding and watering. The Living Lab also connects these students with wider gardening communities in York, organizing trips to other local gardens. To meet the growing demand, new planters, including accessible ones for wheelchair users, have been added on campus, making gardening available to everyone.

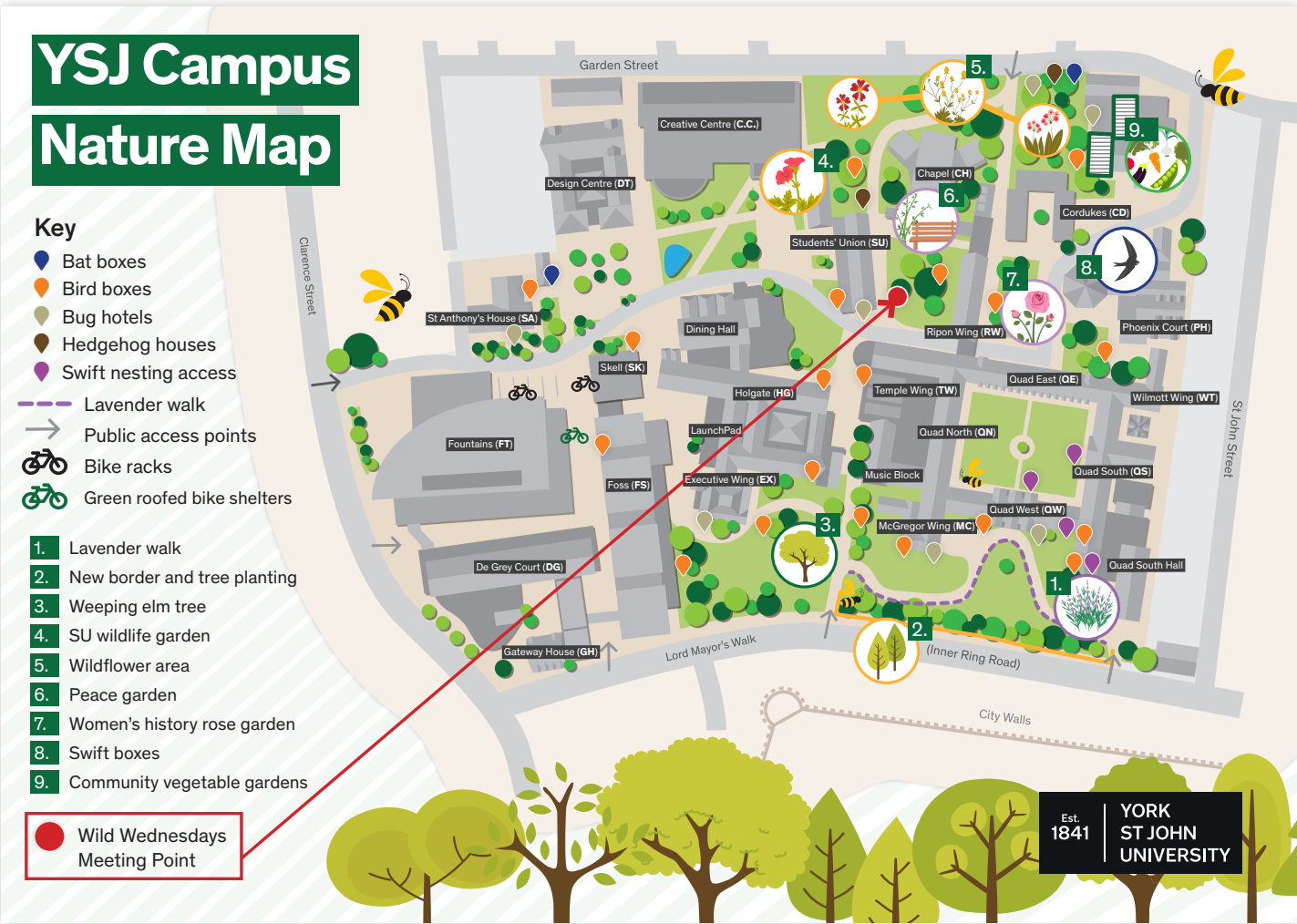


Image 1 – Campus nature map indicating Wild Wednesday meeting spot

The purpose of exploring community gardening at York St John University is to understand its impact on student life and well-being. The primary research question is: ‘How does participation in community gardening influence the physical, mental and social well-being of York St John University students?’. This research aims to provide insights into the potential benefits and challenges of community gardening, offering recommendations for enhancing student engagement and support for such initiatives. This work was conducted by Carys Newton, a second-year Psychology student, as a part of the Student as Researcher Program, contributing to the understanding of how gardening can enrich the student experience at York St John.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing a structured interview to gather rich, detailed insights into the experiences and perspectives of York St John University students involved in community gardening. This was the primary method of data collection, and participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and thoughts in an open-ended manner, providing valuable qualitative data. Participants were students who are actively involved in the community garden at York St John University, these individuals were recruited via email. The data collection process involved conducting a one-hour group interview in a classroom on campus. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained before the interview, ensuring that the participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, their role and their rights. The interview was audio-recorded with participants permission and the recordings are securely stored and only accessible to the research team. The collected data will be analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within qualitative data, (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). This research is similar to Poulsen et al., (2014) study that conducted interviews and focus groups to explore how best to expand wider community gardening participation.

Analysis

The analysis yields two main themes: 'benefits of community gardening' capturing participants' positive experiences, and 'barriers of community gardening', highlighting the challenges they face.

Benefits of community gardening

All participants were consistent in agreeing that there were multiple benefits such as physical and mental advantages when participating in community gardening activities. Interviewees expressed that they felt like gardening promoted positive and healthy well-being and helped develop educational knowledge important for later in life. This is demonstrated in extract 1, where the participant (P) articulates to the interviewer (I) the multiple benefits of community gardening they had experienced.



Image 2 – (Burns Night) How can we improve the community garden?

Extract 1

- I: What do you think of some of the key benefits that community gardening promotes?
- P: Yeah, I think community gardening promotes empathy not only towards nature but towards other people especially in your community.
- P: Also benefits mental health.
- P: Physical health, lots of like moving, bending, stretching muscles that might not otherwise be used.
- P: And I think it's also good for like, education-wise it's good to have this knowledge in case you even need it later down the line, yeah.

In reflecting on the participant's responses, several key benefits of community gardening emerge prominently. The participant emphasises how community gardening fosters empathy not just towards nature, but also within the community, highlighting the social and emotional connection it nurtures. This notion of empathy extends beyond individual well-being, promoting a collective sense of responsibility and care. The participants also point out the mental health benefits, describing it as a therapeutic and calming activity. Physical health is another significant benefit mentioned above, with the participant mentioning various forms of physical exercise involved, such as moving, bending and stretching, which engage different muscle groups, (Kunpeuk et al., 2019). Lastly, the participants touch on the educational value of community gardening, suggesting that the knowledge and skills gained are practical and potentially useful in the future. These insights collectively demonstrate the multifaceted advantages of community gardening, encompassing social, mental, physical and educational aspects.

Likewise, all participants agreed that the long-term benefits of involvement in community gardening encompassed elements such as mental health and physical health. Participants also felt that the representation from the university was a significant factor in recognising the importance of community gardening. This is illustrated in extract 2, where (P) communicates to the interviewer (I) that there are multiple long-term benefits such as employable skills and teamwork.



Image 3 – Students nurturing the campus garden

Extract 2

- I: So, what do you think are the long-term benefits of sustained involvement in community gardening?
- P: So, I was just thinking you have like mental health as well and like physical health.
- P: Long-term benefits just but also the representation from the university and like how it throws community at the university.
- P: Identify more plants, you know what's edible? You know how to grow them in the conditions for that and I guess thinking really long-term, you're more likely to be able to feed yourself going forward as things get a bit iffy, so it also promotes you to do it again. Yeah. Like if you've done community gardening now and you've had a bit of a taster, then you're going to probably do it again next time. Another opportunity comes up, it's got good employable skills like teamwork, and communication.

In analysing the participant's responses, several long-term benefits of sustained involvement in community gardening are evident. The participant initially highlights mental and physical health benefits, suggesting that ongoing participation promotes overall well-being, (Koay & Dillon, 2020). They then emphasize representation and community building, noting that the university's involvement in these initiatives fosters a strong sense of community among students. They then emphasise the importance of representation and community building, noting that the university's involvement in such initiatives fosters a strong sense of community among students. The participants point out the educational benefits, such as plant identification and knowledge of growing conditions, which contribute to self-sufficiency and resilience in uncertain times. This long-term perspective also includes the likelihood of continued engagement in gardening due to positive initial experiences. Participants identify the development of employable skills like teamwork and communication, which are valuable beyond the gardening context. These reflections underscore the holistic and enduring benefits of community gardening, spanning personal health, community cohesion, and practical life skills.



Image 4 – The Wild Wednesday group unites to cultivate campus greenery.

Barriers of community gardening

There was a consensus among participants that implied that a common barrier of community gardening they currently face is accessibility. Interviewees expressed that people who are disabled or have impairments may struggle to join community gardening at this time due to its physical nature and therefore participants were in agreement that they may look at this barrier going forward in terms of inclusivity and accessibility.

Extract 1

- I: What do you think are some of the common barriers that people face when getting involved with community gardening?
- P: I do think accessibility is a big thing, and obviously people with physical impairments, it might be hard to do a lot of what we're doing.
- P: There's a lot of it is a lot of moving around and no, you mean a lot, your arms and legs, things like that.
- P: Yeah, and I'm not saying like, we won't take any measures to make accessibility changes, there is not currently anyone who is physically disabled, we don't have that drive to do that, which I think in turn like discourages people, those disabilities from coming in.

There were several common barriers that participants reflected on when talking about barriers to involvement in community gardening. Participants identified accessibility as a significant issue, particularly for participants who have physical impairments, (Tigere & Moyo, 2021). They explain that gardening often requires extensive physical activity, which can be challenging for those with limited mobility. The participant also acknowledges a lack of current measures to accommodate individuals with disabilities, noting that the absence of accessibility adaptations may discourage people from joining. This illuminates a cyclical problem where the lack of visible inclusivity measures perpetuates low participation among disabled individuals, underscoring the need for proactive efforts to create a more inclusive environment in community gardening activities.

The participant's responses shed light on the significant impact of socioeconomic factors on engagement in community gardening. They highlight that students and individuals who must work to afford living in York often lack the time to participate in community gardening, as their schedules are consumed by multiple part-time jobs. The interviewees also expressed that the situation is exacerbated by the high cost of living, which demands that students work extensively to support their studies.



Image 5 – Bringing the community together through the joy of gardening!



Extract 2

- I: How do you think socioeconomic factors influence people’s ability to engage with community gardening?
- P: Yeah, I definitely think people who are having to actually work to live in York probably don’t have the time or feel like they don’t have the time to take part in community gardening because they’ll probably take off their Wednesdays to be working.
- P: And, I don’t know what I mean, I was more of a big thing with the university overall and the local council to be dealing with, not just for our I think every student should be able to come to York and study about what happening to get part-time work.
- P: Like it’s definitely a huge problem that students don’t have time because they’re hugely overworked with like one or two or three part-time jobs just to afford just ot live in York to study.

The participant acknowledges that socioeconomic factors significantly hinder people’s ability to engage in community gardening, (Christensen et al., 2018), particularly highlighting the struggles of students in York. Many students, burdened by the need to work multiple part-time jobs to afford living expenses and tuition, find themselves with little to no free time for extracurricular activities like community gardening. Interviewees felt that this lack of time is compounded by the high cost of living in York, which forces students to prioritise work over other engagements. The participants also suggest that addressing this issue requires broader support and intervention from both the university and local council to ensure that students have the financial and temporal resources to participate in community activities. This underscores the need for solutions to alleviate the economic pressures on students, therefore enabling higher rates of participation in community gardening from York St John students.



Image 4 – The Wild Wednesday group fostering green spaces across campus.

Discussion

The responses from the group interview highlight both the significant benefits and challenges associated with community gardening, particularly for students at York St John University. The positive benefits are multifaceted, encompassing mental, physical, social and educational dimensions. Interviewees consistently reported that community gardening promotes mental well-being by providing a therapeutic and calming activity that alleviates academic stress. The physical benefits are equally notable, as gardening activities involve multiple forms of exercise such as moving, bending, and stretching. Community gardening fosters social connections and empathy among participants, enhancing community cohesion and support networks. However, the interview responses also identify significant barriers to participation in community gardening, accessibility issues, particularly for individuals with physical impairments, pose a major challenge at this current time. The physical demands of gardening and the current lack of measures to improve accessibility may result in those with disabilities feeling discouraged. Therefore, going forward there is a need for proactive efforts to create an inclusive environment that accommodates diverse physical abilities.



Image 7 – Chefs digging into campus community gardening fun!



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