

Case Studies of Community Gardens:

Seattle's P-Patches

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By David Hess

In Seattle the word “P-Patch” is used instead of “community garden.” The word has its origins in the 1970s, when the Picardo family could no longer operate its farm at a profit. In 1974 the city stepped in to support the farm and ten other community gardens under its “P-Patch Program.” The “P” stands for the Picardo family, but today some also say that the “P” stands “Passionate People Producing Peas in Public.”¹

I interviewed Ray Schutte, the President of P-Patch Trust. Mr. Schutte worked in information technology at Starbucks for years, when he pursued community gardening as an activist and advocate. Now retired, he is able to devote much more time to gardening and to developing the advocacy organization for community gardening in Seattle. The history of P-Patch Trust can be traced back to the 1970s, when the city began to adopt community gardening as part of its mission. In 1979 the gardeners formed the P-Patch Advisory Council, and in 1995 it became Friends of P-Patch. The organization played an important role in maintaining support for the city program during the budgetary crisis of the 1980s. In general city support for community gardening was strong, and even when gardeners were displaced—as occurred when the city’s plans to develop a golf course forced the Interbay Garden to move—the city provided new land and assistance for the garden. In 1987 the P-Patch Advisory Council entered a new phase when it received title to its first garden, which was donated to the organization, and in 1992 the organization’s scope expanded when it initiated a land acquisition fund. By 2002 Friends of P-Patch had purchased four additional gardens and assisted other gardens in achieving more secure land tenure.²

In 2003 the organization entered a new phase when it became P-Patch Trust. The structure changed from an elected, membership-based organization to a donor organization with a self-perpetuating board of directors. As Schutte explained, the change from Friends of P-Patch to P-Patch Trust made it possible for the organization to develop in new ways: “If you want to grow an organization, you need to put people on the board for a reason. The Trust seeks to acquire, protect, preserve, and advocate for community gardens. As an organization, we need to have people who have skills in developing nonprofit organizations, fundraising, advocating before the city council, planning events, and other areas. We bring people to the board because of what they have to offer to the organization, not because they are gardeners.”

The city’s role in community gardening also developed and changed during the 1990s and early 2000s. During that period Seattle experienced rapid growth, which could have been very detrimental to community gardens. However, in Seattle there was a high level of environmental consciousness as well as strong sentiment in favor of preserving the city’s quality of life. Partly in response to anticipated growth, in 1994 the city government adopted a comprehensive city plan called “Towards a Sustainable Seattle.”

The city subsequently shifted planning goals to the neighborhood level, and each of the thirty-eight neighborhoods or “urban villages” produced its own plan. Through a matching funds program from the city, the neighborhoods had a source of funding that could be used for many projects, including the development of green spaces such as community gardens. The city also provided and continues to provide staff support for the city’s community gardens. A joint strategic plan, developed by the P-Patch Trust and the city, has called for one staff person for every twelve gardens. The city has not met the goal, but it does have 5.5 full time staff, perhaps the highest level of support per garden of any city in the U.S. Even during periods of budgetary shortfalls, the city has preserved the level of staff support, in part due to the ongoing support and educational efforts of the P-Patch Trust. In 2000 the city council further supported community gardening by adopting the P-Patch Strategic Plan, which established the goal of adding four new gardens per year. As of 2005 the P-Patch trust inventory listed seventy community gardens in Seattle, or about one garden for every 10,000 residents in the city (or 2500 households). The breakdown of land tenure was as follows: sixteen on Seattle Housing Authority land, twenty on city park land, sixteen on other city land, ten leased from landowners, six owned by P-Patch Trust, three on Metro King County land, and one on a schoolyard. When new gardens are added, the city also tests the soil for contaminants. As Schutte explained, “If there are any problems, the soil is changed or moved out. The Trust doesn’t buy property or even accept a donation without a soil test first.”

Land tenure was fairly secure for all gardens except the ten on land leased from landowners. When land values rose dramatically in Seattle in the early 2000s, pressure for sale has increased. For example, a church that for years leased its land to a community garden for \$100 per year decided in 2005 to sell its land so that it could relocate. The church was willing to sell the land to the community garden at the lower end of the appraised value. The mayor pledged \$190,000 to help keep the community garden alive, but the gardeners were struggling to raise nearly \$160,000 more. Yet, even this case, which was not resolved at the time of writing, revealed good support from city hall. In general only a few gardens have been lost to development since the 1970s.⁴

The P-Patch idea is popular in Seattle, and private developers are now using the idea for rooftop gardens. Schutte explained: “One of the condos in the Cascade neighborhood has green roofs, and it is a complete sell-out. The owner is convinced that the reason it sold out and the speed of the sales had something to do with P-Patch gardens as an amenity. The developer is successfully capitalizing on using the name P-Patch for private gardens that are not open to the public. Some of the most successful rentals also have a P-Patch garden on the roof. Those buildings rent more quickly than buildings that don’t have gardens.”

Equity and Sustainability

About thirty seven of the city’s sixty-two community gardens are located in low-income, ethnically diverse neighborhoods. The P-Patch Trust maintains a Gardenship fund to help low-income gardeners who are unable to pay the low annual plot fees that range from \$31 to \$61. Special programs for low-income and immigrant communities are also codified by the city. As occurs in many cities, community gardeners donate a portion of their produce, and in Seattle the community gardens as a whole donate about seven to ten tons of food per year to food banks. In the Interbay Garden, plots are

dedicated for food banks, and they are maintained by a weekly class on organic gardening, which attracts students/volunteers who help out while they learn to garden. To get the food from the gardens to the hungry, there is a program called "Lettuce Link." Run by the nonprofit organization Fremont Public Association, the program collects produce from the city's community gardens for distribution through food banks to low-income residents. The program also helps educate people to grow their own food and provides them with seed packets and seedlings.⁵

In addition to the plot fee waivers and donation to hunger networks, P-Patch Trust has incubated two programs aimed at low-income residents. Cultivating Communities was developed with support from the Kellogg Foundation to incubate community gardens on public housing land. Once the program was up and running, P-Patch Trust passed it on to the city, which took over the management of the program through its Department of Neighborhoods and the Seattle Housing Authority. The city dedicated a full-time staff person to the program. Two of the gardens on the public housing land also operate as community-supported agriculture. In the gardens on public housing land, unlike those of the P-Patch Trust, gardeners may sell their produce or flowers. The second program, "Cultivating Youth," teaches nutrition through gardening to low-income youth. The program was funded by King County and as of 2005 was in its incubation stage under the P-Patch Trust, but the plan was for it eventually to become integrated into the city government's programs, as occurred with the Cultivating Communities program.

The gardens in low-income neighborhoods experience their own, unique problems. One problem is crime, as Schutte described: "In one garden, when it was first formed, there were police chases through the garden, literally, with guns drawn. Now a city council person gardens in that garden. It's a rough neighborhood that turned around." A related problem is theft: "There are no fences for P-Patches. They're not under lock and key. We have a few problems with the homeless, and last year someone came through cut all the oriental lilies in our garden. Last year we caught a woman loading up a bushel basket with tomatoes. We took the food away and sent it to the food bank. I found that the theft goes down when we post a statement that says, 'If there is any theft in the garden, please call the police at' and then give the police report number. We also invite the police to come down and take their breaks here, to come in to the garden and have lunch."

Another problem is teaching organic gardening techniques, especially to immigrant gardeners who have their own horticultural traditions. One solution has been for P-Patch Trust to sponsor field trips to bring new gardeners to the existing gardens such as Interbay to teach them about organic gardening. As Schutte explained, "A little bit of education goes a long way. Organic gardening is still not as heavy as it is in Interbay, but there's far more organic gardening going on than before the field trip."

There are many possible new avenues for P-Patch Trust to explore. Unlike some community gardening organizations, P-Patch Trust does not work with backyard gardeners. In conjunction with Lettuce Link, the Trust did sponsor a "Day of Giving" for backyard gardeners, but as Schutte explained, "At this point we don't have backyard gardeners dropping off surplus produce. However, this year Lettuce Link will pilot a backyard fruit tree donation program. We also have them on tour all the time. One of the outreach programs that we were involved in at one time attempted to help people in an African-American neighborhood establish backyard gardens, so there have been some

attempts, but none of them have stuck.” Another area of possible expansion is community gardens in schoolyards. The city council supports the idea, and P-Patch Trust is looking at expanding cooperation with schools in its next strategic plan.

Policy Issues and Recommendations

Seattle is a model for American city governments in terms of developing a comprehensive plan with a clear goal for community gardening, decentralizing the planning process by supporting neighborhood-based planning, and supporting the neighborhood plans with funding. In addition to the support from the city government, Seattle has had an active, grassroots gardening community that developed over the years into a formal, nonprofit organization that has increasingly secured independent funding to support community gardening. Because the city itself has made a commitment to shift toward sustainability goals in its urban planning, and it has included community gardens as part of those goals, the relations with the grassroots organization have been much more of a partnership than in other cities.

Why has the partnership been so successful in Seattle? One reason is probably related to land tenure. Unlike some of the eastern cities, community gardens are not located on abandoned lots owned by the city. When that happens, increases in land values coupled with decreases in city budgets can set the city on a collision course with gardeners. In Seattle, most of the gardens are on dedicated public land or land held by the P-Patch Trust. However, there have been some clashes. As Schutte described it, “The city was going to sell Bradner Park to develop it into condominiums. The activists said no and developed a plan to turn it into Bradner Gardens Park with a P-Patch, and the Trust had an involvement with it. People were at Parks Commission meetings, lined up out the door to speak, filling the hall at city council, in the press, and on TV.” The outcome was again positive. Not only did Bradner Park become Bradner Gardens Park, but a voter initiative resulted in a city ordinance that mandated that the city could not sell park land without exchanging it for another property of equal value in the neighborhood.

The conflict with the Department of Parks and Recreation brings up another factor in Seattle’s success with community gardening. In other cities, departments of Parks and Recreation can be fickle partners or even adversaries, because there are many other competing uses of the limited resources of park budgets. Asked about the effect of the departmental affiliation with Neighborhoods, Schutte noted that it had been a very positive factor for community gardening in Seattle. He noted that at one point the community gardens program was located in the Department of Health and Human Services, but it was not part of the department’s mission, so the shift to the neighborhoods department was positive.

He then explained the changing relationship with the parks department: “Up until very recently the Parks and Recreation Department was unfriendly toward P-Patch. When building a new park, they never thought of putting in a P-Patch, even though it is a multi-use property. Now they often think about using a portion of the park as a P-Patch, and they’re even thinking about using a portion of the parks’ funds to buy a property and turn it into a P-Patch. In the last three or four years this adversarial relationship has really changed. We kept a very friendly relationship with them. Several new parks have been developed by community groups that include a P-Patch within them, such as the Trolley Hill Park. The gardeners share a tool shed with the Parks Department, and they help

maintain the park. So the symbiotic relationships developed, and they've come to accept that a P-Patch is an acceptable use. It's not just the gardeners who benefit; all sorts of people benefit from walking through the garden. People also come here to learn about gardening. There's more interchange that takes place in a community garden than on a tennis court or a golf course." In 2005 the Parks and Recreation department even took the step of naming one of the leading activists of the Bradner Park controversy as a community leader.

A fourth reason for the success of the partnership is that the gardeners have been very careful politically. As Schutte explained, "The second director of P-Patch was very politically astute and very well respected. That was part of it. The first five-year plan although supported by the Director of the Department of Neighborhoods was very difficult to develop, but the city now recognizes that a five-year plan for community gardens is a good thing. Everyone on the city council has a suggestion about how to make community gardens better, and we don't run into an adversarial relationship.

"We're careful as an organization when an election is coming up. As an organization we do not take sides. I think it's important whenever someone is elected to meet them as soon as possible. We let them know who we are, what we do, and what our relationship is with the community. P-Patch has a lot of good will in Seattle." For example, when the new mayor came into power and was looking at budget for places to cut, the P-Patch Trust (then Friends of P-Patch) worked with him in a non-adversarial way. As Schutte explained, "The mayor knew very little about P-Patches when he first came in. We met with him and didn't confront him. We wanted to make him a friend, and we said, 'This is what we'd like to see, and we'd like to know what you'd like us to do to help get that.' We didn't come in with demands such as, 'You need to do this and that.' It wasn't adversarial. He said that there were going to be cuts, and they would be all over the city, and he promised that he wouldn't decimate the program. In the end, we never lost anything, and the mayor has changed his mind and has a very positive attitude about gardens."

According to Schutte, one of the biggest barriers that P-Patches face in Seattle is the increasing land values and the associated problem of raising funds to purchase properties. "I'd like to raise more funds and find some large donors who we could depend on to put together campaigns or help us buy properties. We're working on giving and planned giving, where people can leave money to the Trust. We have a beautiful piece of property that a woman wants to see preserved. It's a \$1.5 million property, and we could never afford to buy it, but she has written the Trust into her will. The barrier is figuring out how to get the message out there and how to court a donor."

Web site: <http://www.ppatchtrust.org>

Based on an interview by David Hess with Ray Schutte, June 6, 2005, and a visit to the Interbay Garden.

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