

An Investigation into the Attitudes and Approaches of a Group of Landscape Managers to the Inclusion of Edible Plants in Public Landscapes in Greater London

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Under established norms and conventions in the UK, ornamental plant species frequently dominate the soft landscaping of public space. In urban settings food growing is frequently confined to private space, or to landscapes with limited public access. Mounting pressure within the global food system has generated a developing discourse in the UK and elsewhere in relation to urban agriculture, and there is increasing public interest in food growing. Although there are examples of the use of edible planting in public spaces in the UK and in other countries, there is little research into the attitudes and approaches of landscape managers in this regard, directly involving managers themselves.

The aim of this exploratory study was therefore to explore the attitudes and approaches of a group of landscape managers to the inclusion of edible plants in public landscapes in greater London, including the associated benefits, challenges and practical considerations, and the public response, and to generate hypotheses for further research in this regard.

The research was conducted through in-depth interviews with seven managers responsible for a wide range of public landscapes in greater London, including historic parks and gardens, other public parks, and community gardens. The data was analysed using an inductive approach.

The research demonstrated that a range of edible planting schemes has been implemented in public landscapes in London. This included fruit and nut trees in streets, parks, orchards, and civic spaces, allotment-style gardens, herb beds, mixed ornamental and edible schemes, and other edible planting such as exotics. Some plantings were directly managed by the interviewee's organisation, while others were managed and maintained by community groups or individuals.

The research established the aims and purposes which managers associated with the edible planting schemes for which they were responsible, and generated hypotheses in connection with the challenges associated with edible planting in public space, the conditions that would be required for movement towards large-scale urban agriculture, and the capacity of food growing to engage communities, build community cohesion and connection, and generate community conversation.

The challenges associated with edible planting in public space, together with strategies to overcome them, were identified as follows:

- **Historic and current uses of existing landscapes** can impose constraints on change towards edible landscaping. Historic authenticity and protection appeared to take precedence over change to include edibles in the landscape, and in the context of increasing pressure on open space in London, land availability for edible planting and other siting considerations for edible schemes can pose challenges.

However, managers had found creative ways to overcome these challenges, such as reversible, temporary schemes and the use of sites that have not been previously publicly accessible.

- Although the research found that “traditional” or conventional ***mindsets and approaches***, which gravitate towards the established norms of ornamental horticulture, could represent a barrier to the development of public edible planting, on the whole managers appeared comfortable, even enthusiastic in some cases, about the use of edibles in public spaces. There is therefore scope and opportunity for managers with experience, interest and enthusiasm to experiment with edibles and to raise their profile as appropriate plants in public space.
- The research demonstrated the need for ***horticultural knowledge, skills and experience relevant to edibles***. Volunteer and community coordination skills were also found to be necessary for the successful implementation of edible schemes involving communities in development and maintenance.
- Some interviewees believed that ***more flexible management and more intensive resourcing*** for set up and maintenance are required for an edible scheme than for an ornamental landscape. The research suggested that edible schemes may be more viable in single-setting organisations with directly managed labour, such as historic and contemporary gardens rather than multi-setting agencies with a peripatetic and/or outsourced workforce responsible for a wide range of public space issues. Resourcing challenges can also be resolved by reducing or even eliminating the food production requirement, and/or through community engagement and volunteer labour. However, there seemed to be no appetite for commercial food production schemes amongst interviewees, even in the current financial climate. Partnership appeared to be an important strategy to build support and gain resources for the implementation of edible schemes.
- The research findings indicated that ***land contamination*** can be a barrier to the implementation of edible planting in public London landscapes. Although more research is required to understand the effects on human health of consuming food produced in urban soils, the research findings outline workable strategies to address contamination concerns, such as raised beds, planters and containers, ground barriers, and ground level changes.

Interviewees also identified a number of design and other considerations in developing the edible schemes under discussion. These included aesthetic and design considerations, water access and irrigation, additional maintenance tasks and pest and disease. As regards enclosure and public access, many but not all of the edible schemes were as publicly accessible as the wider landscape in which they were situated.

Food production and use varied in importance to interviewees. All managers felt that food produced could be used by volunteers or community group members, in educational sessions with children, by gardens staff, or by the general public.

Community engagement, cohesion and connection were almost always integral to the edible schemes included in the research – as an aim, and/or as a pre-requisite for success, and/or as a realised positive

outcome. Conversely no evidence of food production as an aim in itself for edible planting in public spaces in London was found, nor of inclination on the part of managers to significantly expand food production areas or to consider major or commercial food-growing operations on the sites they managed. It is therefore suggested that movement towards large-scale urban agriculture in London is unlikely without major change in perceptions of food security and/or changes in national, local and organisational political and policy direction.

Furthermore, the research identified a seemingly positive public response to the use of edibles in the public landscapes discussed, together with a range of positive outcomes. Benefits attributed to the edible planting under consideration included increased income, publicity and goodwill, scope for creativity in planting design, opportunities for the communication of a range of messages, for example, about recycling, conservation, food security, poverty and history, and and increased engagement and empowerment of resident groups.

These outcomes point to the potential, which could be further investigated, for food and food growing to engender surprise and delight, enhance community cohesion and connection across diverse groups, and generate community conversation. To capitalise on such benefits more widely, it is likely to be necessary to learn from and build on successful experiences, encourage creativity and flexibility in the use of public space, and develop and share knowledge on the traits and performance of edibles in public settings. Some change in the mindsets, approaches *and intent* of green space professionals may also be required, away from some of the established norms, conventions and values of ornamental design and horticulture, and towards greater risk-taking with edible planting in the light of positive public response. A relative rebalancing of other priorities such as historic authenticity and preference for established ornamental species may also be needed.

A critical mass of confident and enthusiastic practitioners could play a vital part in leading and encouraging such developments in the green space sector. The research findings point to an existing and growing cadre of landscape managers who could take up this role.

Public interest in food and food growing continues to be high. The research indicates that there is potential for the green space sector to capitalise on this successfully, and to deliver a range of social and cultural benefits through the immediacy, relevance and universality of food within communities.

Limitations

The research findings are subject to a number of limitations, largely due to limited time and resources. Most importantly the findings are not generalisable across other public space settings, landscape managers or times, and relate only to the subjects involved at the time and place the research was carried out. However users of the research may themselves choose to make naturalistic generalisations, based on a similarity between the settings they have in mind and those upon which the research has been based.

Recommendations for further research

The research constituted an exploratory study with a small group of landscape managers and generated hypotheses about the purposes and challenges associated with edible planting in public space, and the

conditions that would be required for movement towards large-scale urban agriculture. It is suggested that a survey of a wider group of landscape managers, either within London or more broadly across the UK, could be conducted to test these hypotheses and to build the evidence base further.

Hypotheses relating to the public response to food growing, and to the capacity of food growing to engage communities, enhance community cohesion and connection and generate community conversation also emerged. These hypotheses could be tested further, for example by surveys of individuals, including in open space settings, covering visual preferences and other responses to edible planting. Furthermore, the capacity of food growing to generate community engagement, cohesion, connection and conversation could be tested through a case study of a suitable site.

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