

Growing Health: Using community food growing to deliver public health outcomes



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Introduction It is widely recognised that gardening and food growing has a positive impact on people's health and wellbeing and there is a growing body of evidence to support this (Schmutz *et al.*, 2014). Regular contact with plants and the natural environment can improve mental wellbeing and combined with the activity of growing food it can help improve physical health for wide range of abilities and ages.

Summary of evidence

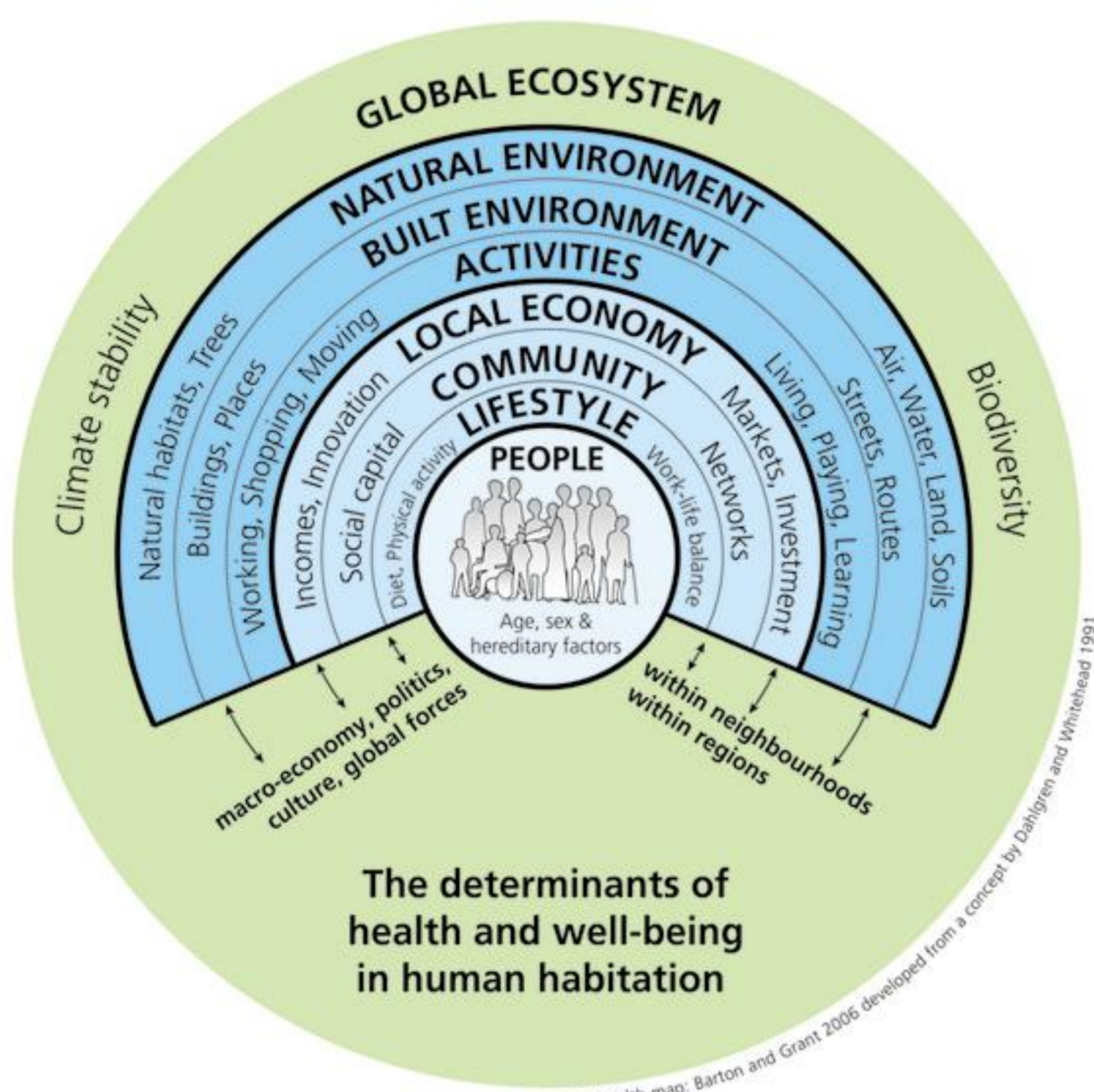
Regular involvement in gardening can

- Improve psychological health, by reducing stress, the severity of stress and associated depression
- Increase physical activity, burn calories and contribute to maintaining a healthy weight and reduce the risk of obesity
- Help with rehabilitation or recovery from surgery or other medical interventions
- Improve the quality of life for people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease and help alleviate symptoms such as agitation and aggressive behaviour
- Contribute to improved social interactions and community cohesion
- Provide access to locally grown, fresh produce and help increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables, as well as improving attitudes to healthy eating
- Introduce people to a way of life that can help them to improve their wellbeing in the longer term.

Food growing and the wider determinants of health

As the wider determinants of health model shows there are many social, economic and environmental factors that impact on health.

Figure 1. The Wider Determinants of Health (Barton and Grant, 2006)



Community food growing projects can have positive benefits on these:

Individual lifestyle: supports a healthy lifestyle with regular outdoor activity and contact with nature which helps improve physical and mental health. Provides access to healthy, affordable, locally grown food

Social and community: engages the community and enhances mechanisms for getting people involved in things that matter to them

Activities: promotes health and wellbeing as well as an opportunity for learning new skills

Built environment: physical exercise is designed into the local area

Natural environmental factors: enhances the natural environment and engages people with nature

Growing Health

Growing Health is a joint project between Garden Organic and Sustain funded by the Tudor Trust. It has created an active industry advisory board and network of healthcare professionals, academics and representatives of community growing initiatives. It is developing a comprehensive UK network to see how community food growing can be routinely used by the health service as a way of promoting health and wellbeing.

Public health commissioning

The project 'Growing Health' (www.growinghealth.info) identified examples of public health commissioning and supporting community food growing to deliver health and wellbeing outcomes. Many projects have links with public health and five of the selected thirteen case studies of community food growing projects, documented so far, are supported by public health.

Table 1. Public Health Commissioning of Community Food

Project Name	Location	Directly funded	Health/wellbeing area	Evaluation	Results
Bradford Community Environment Project (BCEP)	Bradford	Yes, commissioned	Reduce local inequalities in health and wellbeing	Informal surveys self-reporting	Improved physical health, awareness of healthy eating, mental wellbeing
Gardens for Life, Women's Environmental Network	London Borough of Tower Hamlets	Yes, commissioned pilot	Health and wellbeing enhancing nutrition and physical activity and improving quality of life through developing social capital	Shorter Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale X2 questionnaires, case studies and verbal feedback	Improved mental wellbeing. Improved general wellbeing and some self reported positive changes to eating and consuming behaviours plus general awareness of healthy eating. Increased community cohesion. Increased local opportunities for volunteering.
Growing Opportunities, Ideal for All	Sandwell and the Black Country	Yes, plus other funding sources	Obesity, physical activity, mental wellbeing and community resilience	Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)	Contribution to enhanced experiences of wellbeing. Improved knowledge and actions relating to healthy diet and physical activity. Contribution to enhanced experiences of social inclusion and social relationships and networks. Contribution towards improved learning, capacities and skills. Regeneration of communities and sites using an asset based model.
Harvest Brighton and Hove Food Partnership:	Brighton and Hove	Yes, commissioned	Healthy eating, physical activity and mental wellbeing	Independent evaluation by University of Brighton plus case studies	Increased volunteering led to improved mental wellbeing from being outdoors, making new friends and increasing skills and confidence and improved physical health from gardening or eating shared meals on site.
Lincolnshire Master Gardeners Programme, Garden Organic	Lincolnshire	Yes, commissioned	Health and wellbeing Improving the wider determinants of health and health improvement	External evaluation Coventry University and University of Gloucestershire, impact on health, social and environmental aspects and Social Return on Investment	Sustained behavioural change and positive impacts for people and communities including growing and consuming fruit and veg and life satisfaction. Plus building social capital, opportunities for personal development, employability and economic impact and health, including increased weight management, improved knowledge and nutrition, healthy eating.

Opportunities

- To build upon the good self reported benefits
- To develop 'action-based' research to show the cost-effectiveness of food growing programmes compared with other interventions
- To build confidence in the public health team by promotion, knowledge sharing and training
- In addition to health outcomes, food growing provides significant added value, including an increase in biodiversity and ecosystem value, development of skills and learning opportunities, production of accessible healthy food

Challenges

- Collecting evidence of health outcomes by often small volunteer run food growing projects can be difficult
- Difficulty of comparing gardening and food growing to other programmes
- Levels of awareness within public health of the benefits of gardening are still relatively low
- Growing food doesn't fit the standard public health delivery model, as activity can be limited by the growing season and the weather

Conclusion

The Growing Health project has reviewed how public health are using food growing to meet their outcomes. Investing in and supporting community food growing can provide an effective way to improve health as well as prevent ill health.

Examples include:

- Commissioning community food growing projects to deliver health outcomes
- Supporting the setting up or development of projects, including funding
- Providing access to land and other resources such as staff support

References

Schmutz U., *et al* (2014). *The benefits of gardening and food growing for health and wellbeing*. Garden Organic and Sustain. [online] www.growinghealth.info
 Barton, H. and Grant, M. (2006) A health map for the local human habitat. *The Journal for the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126 (6). pp. 252-253. ISSN 1466-4240