



Spaces of Quiet  
Sustainability

# East European Food Gardens as Spaces of Care

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- Current conventional food system - one of the principal causes of the crisis of late modernity
  - environmental degradation (climate change, loss of biodiversity...)
  - social problems and conflicts (rise of inequalities, exploitation, anomie, malnutrition...)
  - health problems (new diseases, obesity...)
- The dominant responses rely on change in individual consumer behaviour
  - agents of change are ethical consumers motivated to act responsibly
  - based on consumers' education and knowledge about the functioning of the food chain and its social and environmental effects
- Goal of presentation: to show the importance of a neglected, everyday, informal practice with a potential for positive change – food self-provisioning and sharing

# Mainstream (visible) food alternatives

- Crisis of the conventional food system – long-term problem
- A range of alternatives emerged
  - against social, environmental and health destructive effects of the dominant system
- Alternatives aimed at protecting
  - local farming (community supported agriculture)
  - distant plantation workers (Fair Trade)
  - human health (organic food)
  - non-human life (animal welfare; organic food)
  - local traditions and tastes (local provenance labels)
-  Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)



- Unacknowledged moralism at work here:
- Presumption that people are naturally inclined to act egoistically in pursuit of their own self-interest unless they are educated and motivated by knowledge and reason to do otherwise
- Reliance on intentionality:  
*“...people need to be shown the consequences of their actions in order to be motivated to change behaviour, to take responsibility, to become more caring for the world around them” (Barnett & Land 2007)*
- Key role of knowledge and education as a prerequisite of behavioural change
  - Importance of geographical knowledge about interconnectedness of the world (and its unintended consequences)
- Unless exposed to this type of education, people do not already care and behave responsibly
  - *“...trapped within self-interested, privatized worlds of restricted imagination” (Pottinger 2018)*

- AFNs and research on AFN are important in drawing attention to the scale of crisis but also to the opportunities for food innovation and creativity
- But: AFNs' significance is limited in “quantitative” terms:
  - proportion of alternatively produced food is small (1% of global food trade is organic and FT food)
  - social exclusivity (young, educated, upwardly mobile, middle class, urban people)
  - dependent on unpaid voluntary work and external grants (Sonnino & Griggs-Trevarthen 2013)
  - often geographically isolated
- Nevertheless, AFNs can be thought of as “fragments of the beautiful Anthropocene” (Buck 2015)
  - but lack the transformation capacity, limited capacity for “scaling up”.

# Food self-provisioning

- Historically established “alternatives”
  - widespread – including in relatively affluent societies of Central Europe
  - routinised, embedded in life-style and social practices
  - socially diverse and inclusive
- Academically neglected („the invisible gardener”) (Jehlička 2021)
  - often interpreted as strategies of coping with poverty during the socialist era and post-socialist transformation
  - or residua of pre-capitalist relations
  - set to disappear and hence unimportant for knowledge....
- In spite of this: source of inspiration for new configurations of food provisioning systems?



- Dataset 1

- representative sample of Czech population, quotes: gender, age, education, size of settlement, region
- CAPI method of data collection, March 2020
- N = 1047

- Dataset 2

- panel of “gardeners” (respondents with access to land regardless of acreage and type of ownership; professional farmers excluded)
- CAWI method of data collection, April 2020, N = 1037

- Dataset 3

- repeated semi-structured interviews with gardeners in Brno: 4 rounds of interviewing in four seasons.
- includes detailed diary records (food logs) kept by households – data on types of food consumed in the household, amount of all types, and sources of food (retail sector, garden, gift) - during 4 months in a year
- research conducted by Lucie Sovová in 2018 (27 households).

- **Widespread practice**

- 41% of Czech households grow food (dataset 1)
- gardens adjacent to house (64% of gardens), on allotment sites (15%), by second homes (17%) (dataset 2).
- only 7 gardens (0.7 %) in community gardens

- **All social groups involved**

- The share of food gardeners is comparable in groups defined by age, level of education and income (dataset 1)
- But: access to land is the main exclusionary factor
- Retired people overrepresented among gardeners (but not among economically disadvantaged). Our reasoning: availability of time for a practice considered a hobby rather than coping strategy.

- **Not a survival strategy:**

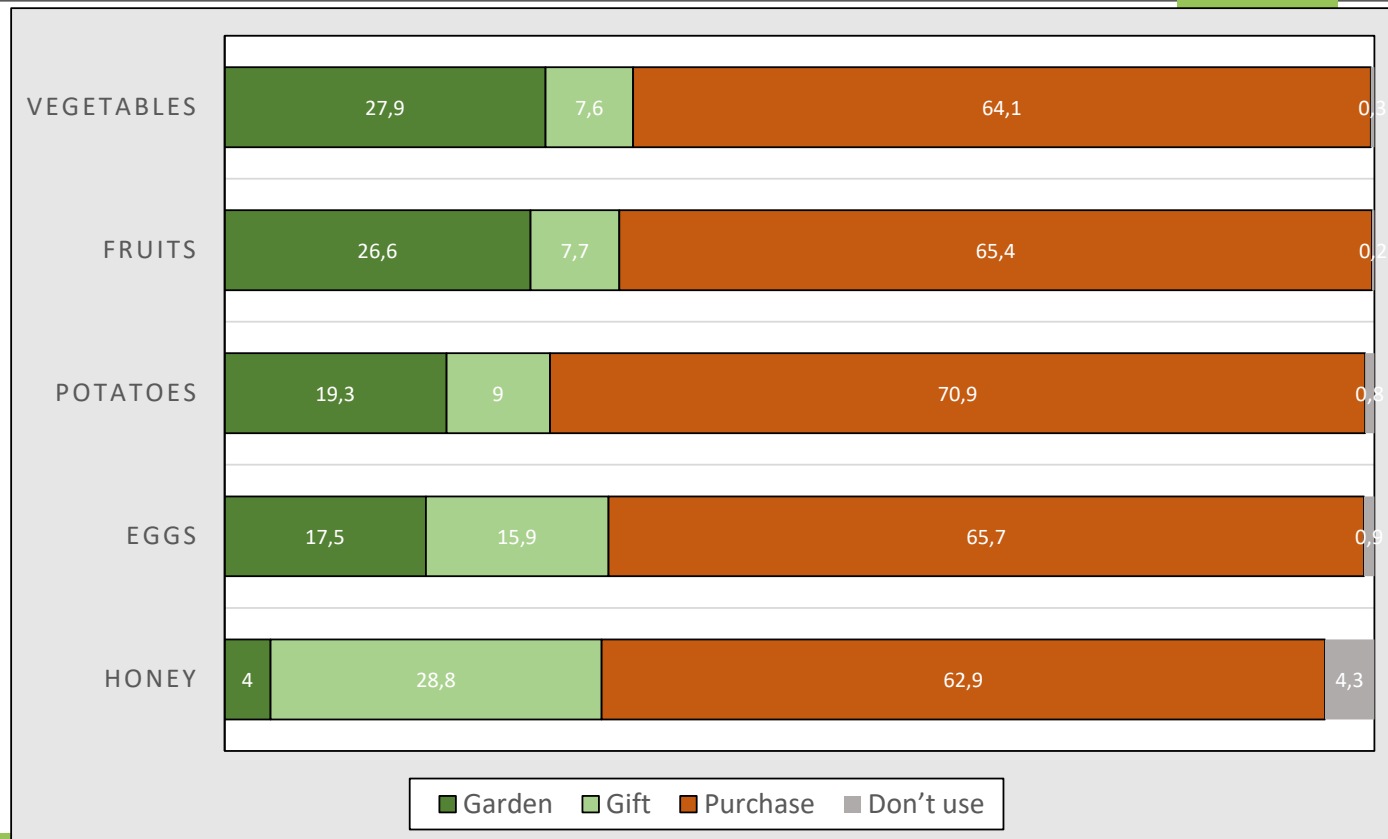
- Historical argument: if it were a survival strategy, the share of gardeners would decrease with growing affluence of society. But it remains constant.
  - Surveys in 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020: percentage of gardeners in the population between 38 and 43 %
- Sociological argument: if it were a survival strategy, the poor would grow more but they do not.



# Food self-provisioning's economic benefits

Proportion of home-grown food, food gifts and purchases in retail sector in total food consumption by households (respondents' estimates)

- Only gardeners' households (dataset 2)
- Example of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham)

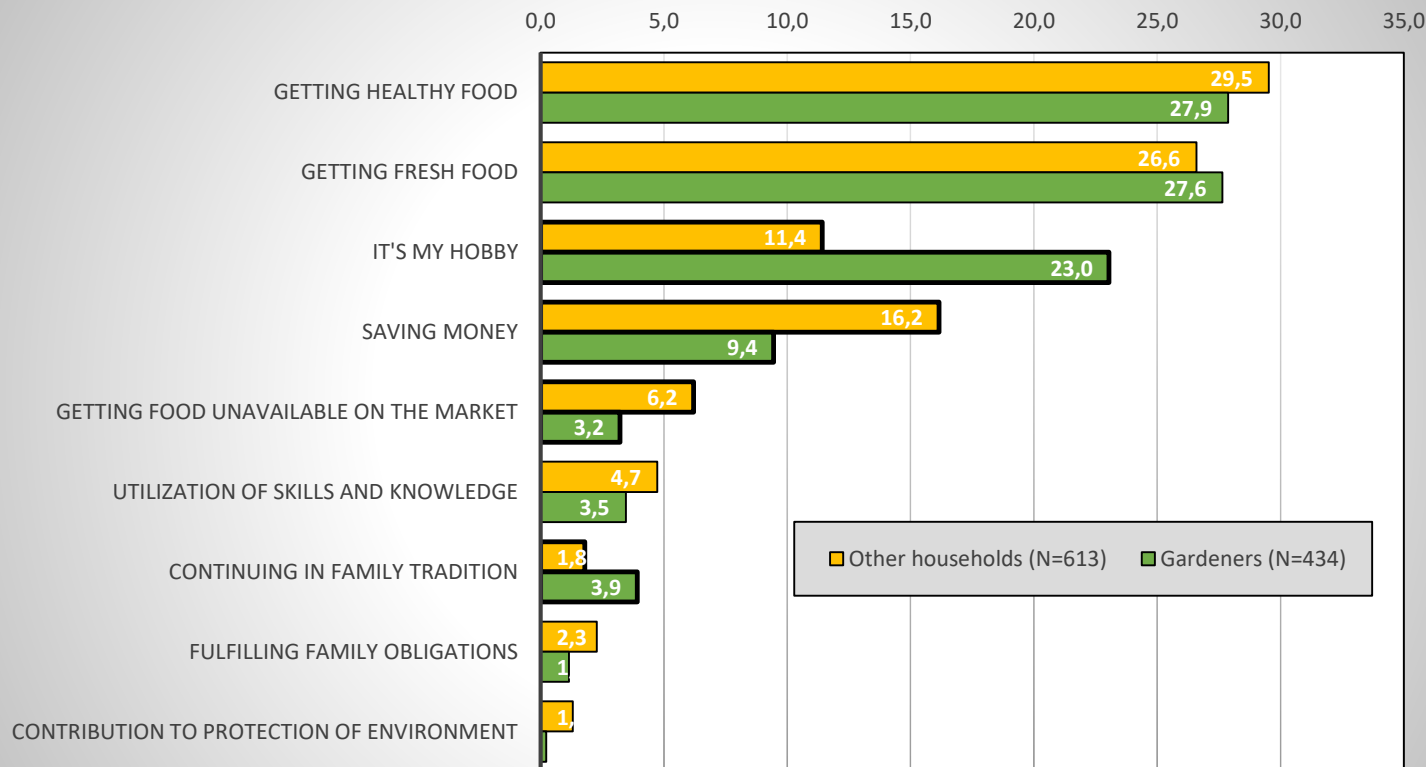


# Motivations for food self-provisioning

- Question:

From the following list of possible reasons for growing your own food choose the three most important ones.

Only the first most important reason depicted in the chart.  
(dataset 1)



# Motivations for food self-provisioning

- More than hobby in the sense of leisure or entertainment
- Demonstration of responsibility and care
  - Extended time is spent in the garden
  - Developing advanced cropping schemes
  - Experimenting with new cultivation methods and plant varieties
  - Interest in new pieces of knowledge, experience and skills
- A component of identity (Sovová, Veen 2020)



- *„First of all, having fresh vegetables is an unmatched, unbeatable experience. The second thing is to show our grandchildren what can be done in the garden, or how you actually get fruit.“ (Man 70-80 years of age)*
- *„It's the most perfect experience, eating what we got from the garden or what someone gave us from their garden. It's an euphoric feeling that this is the way it's supposed to be, that this is right, some idea that we are still somehow connected to the land.“ (Woman 30-40 years of age) (dataset 3)*

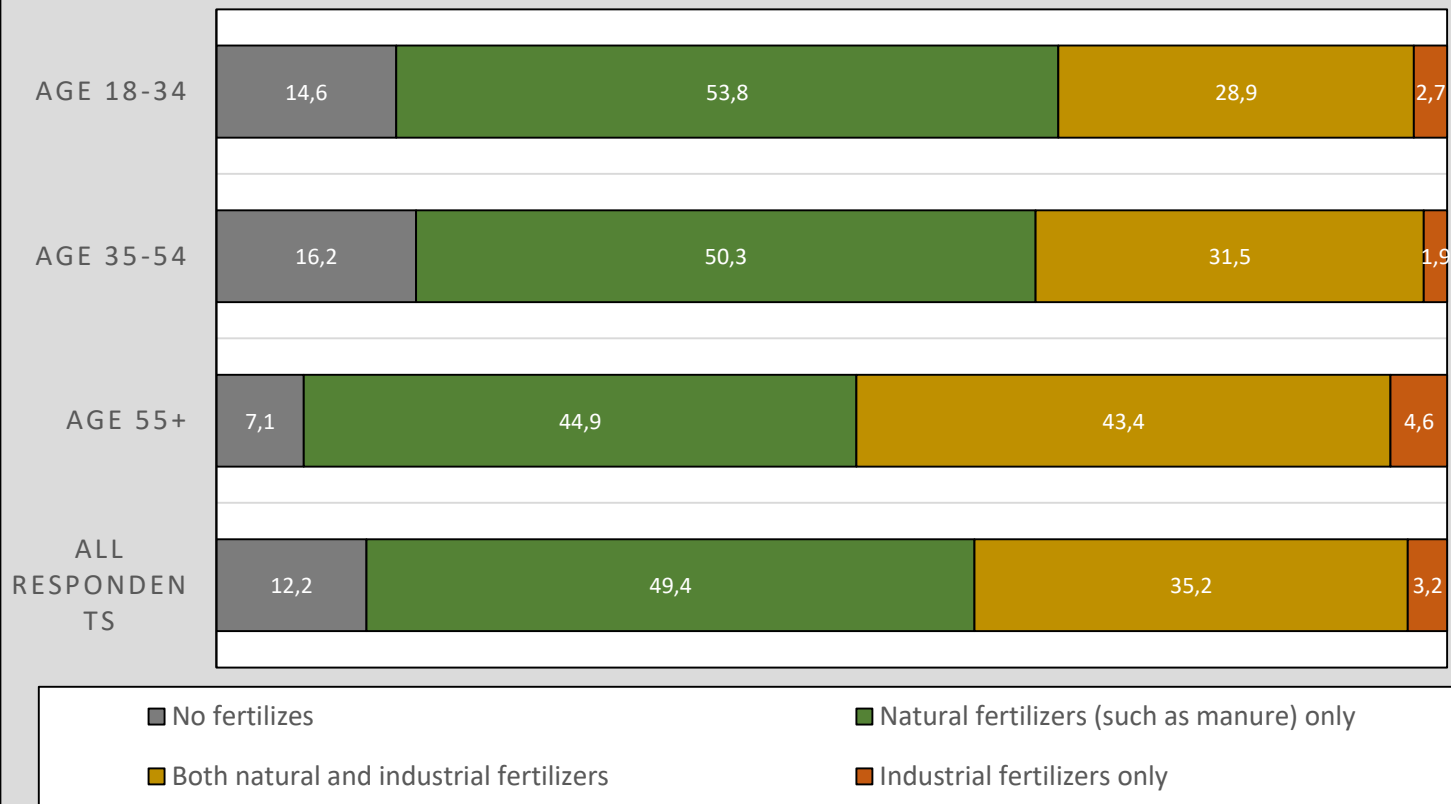
# 1. FSP as caring for the garden

- The explicit environmental motivation is low among the gardeners
  - Mentioned in the last rank on the list of reasons for FSP
  - „Contributing to the protection of environment“ was the first reason for FSP for only one out of 434 gardeners in the dataset 1.
  - However: sustainable production methods prevail in cultivation practices.
  - Demonstration of care for soil and plants on it.
- Contradiction between a cognizant motivation based on education and consciousness, and practical behaviour.
- Examples
  - Use of fertilisers
  - Pest protection methods
  - Organic waste management



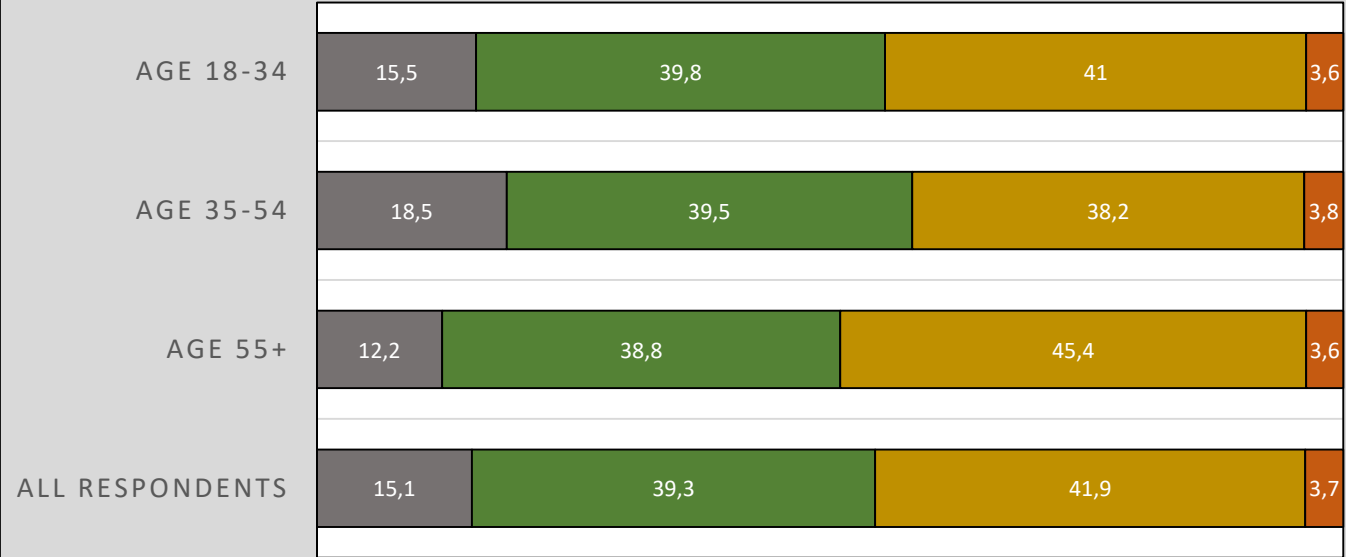
# Use of fertilizers

● Question:  
Considering the  
way of soil  
fertilization, what  
types of fertilizers  
you use?  
(dataset 2)



# Ways of pest protection

- Question:  
How do you dispose  
of pests and fungi?  
(dataset 2)



■ In no way  
■ We use natural methods only  
■ We use both natural methods and chemical spraying  
■ We use chemical spraying only

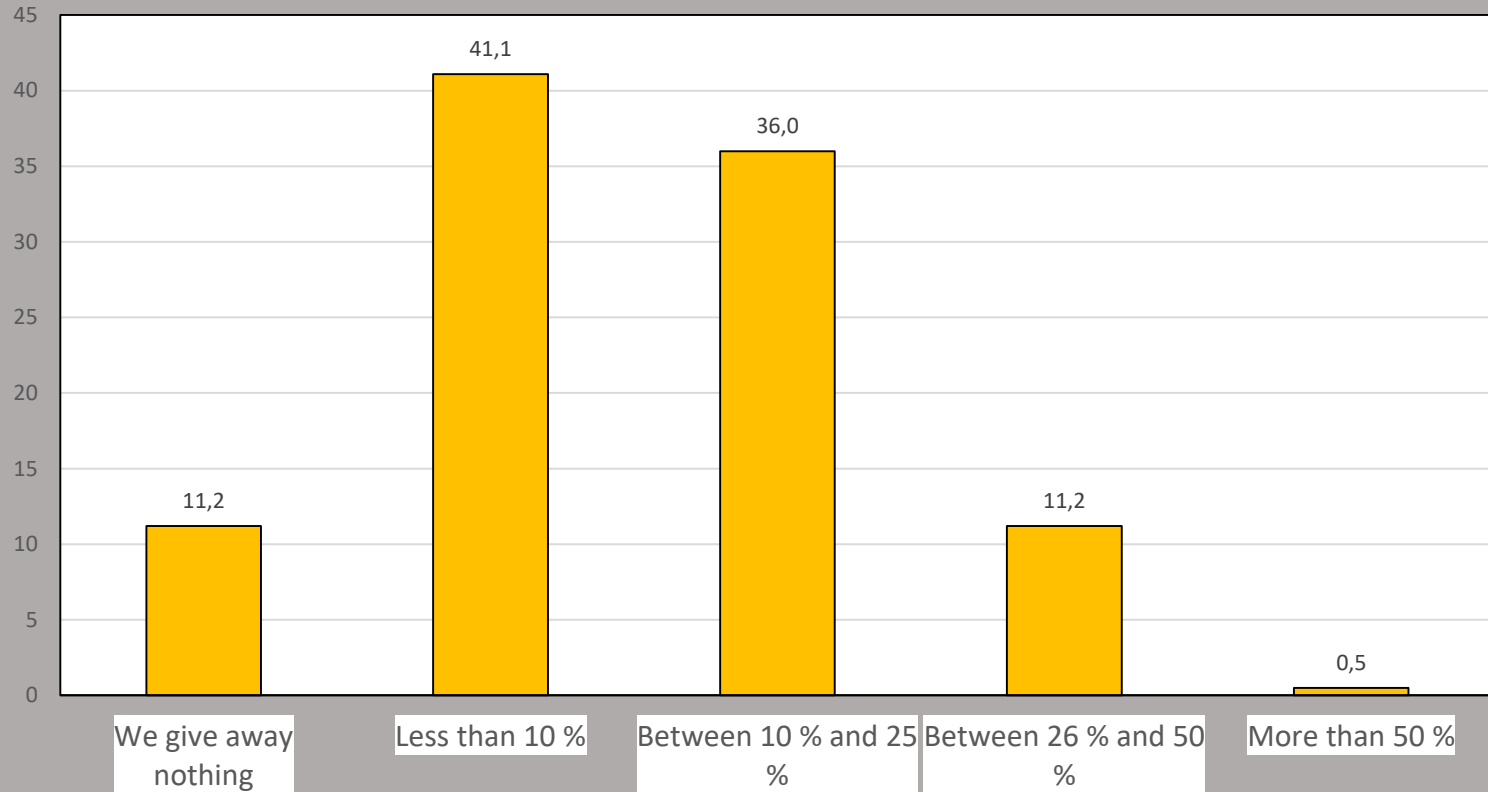
## 2. FPS as caring for the loved ones

- Food gardening connects hobby and pleasure with responsibility and obligation
  - Caring for garden needs labour and time.
  - The outcome is food which is „valuable“ outside the market relations.
  - Such food is endowed with ability to create and foster social ties.
- Caring for the garden is connected to care for the loved ones through food sharing (in the form of gifts and barter)
  - Such as help of relatives and friends with harvesting.
  - Or the gardeners want to show their achievement in the form of gifts to friends and relatives.
  - Or the gardeners give away some produce purposefully to invigorate social ties.
- *„We grow so many carrots because some of our children still have little children, so for them to have non-chemical carrots.“ (Man 70-80 years of age)*

# The extent of food sharing (gifts, barter)

- Question:

What proportion of food that you cultivate or produce in your household you give away to someone or exchange with someone?  
(dataset 2)





# 2. Care for the loved ones: generosity

- We constructed a fictitious figure of „active gardeners“: those who cover at least 26 % of domestic consumption of vegetables or fruits.
- Active gardeners divided in two subgroups:
  - „Generous active gardeners“ (= sharing > 1/10 of domestic produce; n=314), and
  - „Other active gardeners“ (sharing ≤ 1/10 of domestic produce; n=267) (dataset 2)
- Who are the generous active gardeners?
  - Prevail in the oldest and the youngest age groups (less represented in the middle age groups)
  - Have higher standard of education
  - Have more extensive social ties
  - Participate more often in informal self-help groups (such as babysitting, shop delivery, care for elderly or ill, help with work in the garden etc.)
- „Corporeal generosity“ (Barnett a Land 2007), embedded in relationships of responsiveness and attentiveness to others.

- Food gardening – a set of diverse everyday practices that are socially and geographically widespread, socially embedded, diverse, and non-exclusive.
  - Significant in terms of both the number of participating households and the quality and quantity of produce.
  - A highly productive practice that generates volumes of fruits and vegetables outside the market economy.
  - Transcend both the straightforward productivist motivations and the simple desire for enjoyment in the form of a hobby.
- Practices and spaces imbued with capacity to connect the social and the environmental – through the care for the garden and care for the loved ones.
  - The care the loved ones is expressed through provision of „good food “ („good “ in both the visceral and moral sense).
  - The desire to produce good food translates into the adoption of sustainable methods of cultivation.
  - The practices of food sharing include also recipients who do not grow food themselves.

# Conclusion

- Food gardening contests the implicit association of care in food provision with political activism.
  - It is questioning the reliance on alternatives only in activist, political, labelling-based initiatives.
- The absence of political activism does not mean that food gardening is lacking an ethical dimension.
  - Their stubborn refusal of market rationality, and their care for non-capitalist relations, are manifestations of their quiet resistance, creating a „third space“ outside the disciplining power of both the state and the market.
- Studying food gardening through the lens of an ethic of care holds a promise of novel and important insights for re-thinking and transformation of food systems.
  - Along environmentally and socially more beneficial lines.
  - Largely outside the capitalist market relations.





# Thank you for your attention!

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