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# KNOX Community Gardens: Growing Crops and Social Capital among Urban Gardeners in Hartford

Grace Metry

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## INTRODUCTION

Urban gardens can function as spaces for cooperative action based on mutual benefit, shared norms, and trust. Strengthening social networks within a community makes this group action possible. Ideally, community gardens can form a camaraderie of gardeners by careful design of physical space. KNOX can play an important role in creating urban community gardens that enhance the opportunities for social action and group benefit.

Successful community action depends on the social capital created through: **Bonding** that happens when two fellow gardeners meet together at their KNOX community garden and share an interest in growing food and plants. **Bridging** that links gardeners beyond their initial interest in gardening; it occurs when gardeners talk about other interests, or spend time together outside of the garden that leads to stronger relationships.

There are currently twenty-two KNOX community gardens and five new gardens planned for next year. We ask the question: **Is KNOX utilizing its gardens in the most effective way to increase the social capital of Hartford gardeners and neighborhoods?** The goal should be to create gardens that promote social inclusion, community activism, and reduction of crime.

## METHODOLOGY

My research approach is informed by:

- Review of the literature on social capital, the production of space, and the multiple meanings of community gardens
- Ethnographic observations of 19 out of the 22 KNOX Gardens
- Semi-structured interviews with community gardeners and the KNOX program director
- Semi-structured anonymous surveys of KNOX employees

## AMENITIES MAP

This map shows where the community gardens are located and the different types of KNOX gardens. The three groups of gardens are arranged in order of amenities determined by size of green space, amount of garden furniture, and presence of infrastructure for socializing.

- Yellow Group- Low amenity gardens (7)
- Orange Group- Medium amenity gardens (8)
- Red Group- High amenity gardens (4)

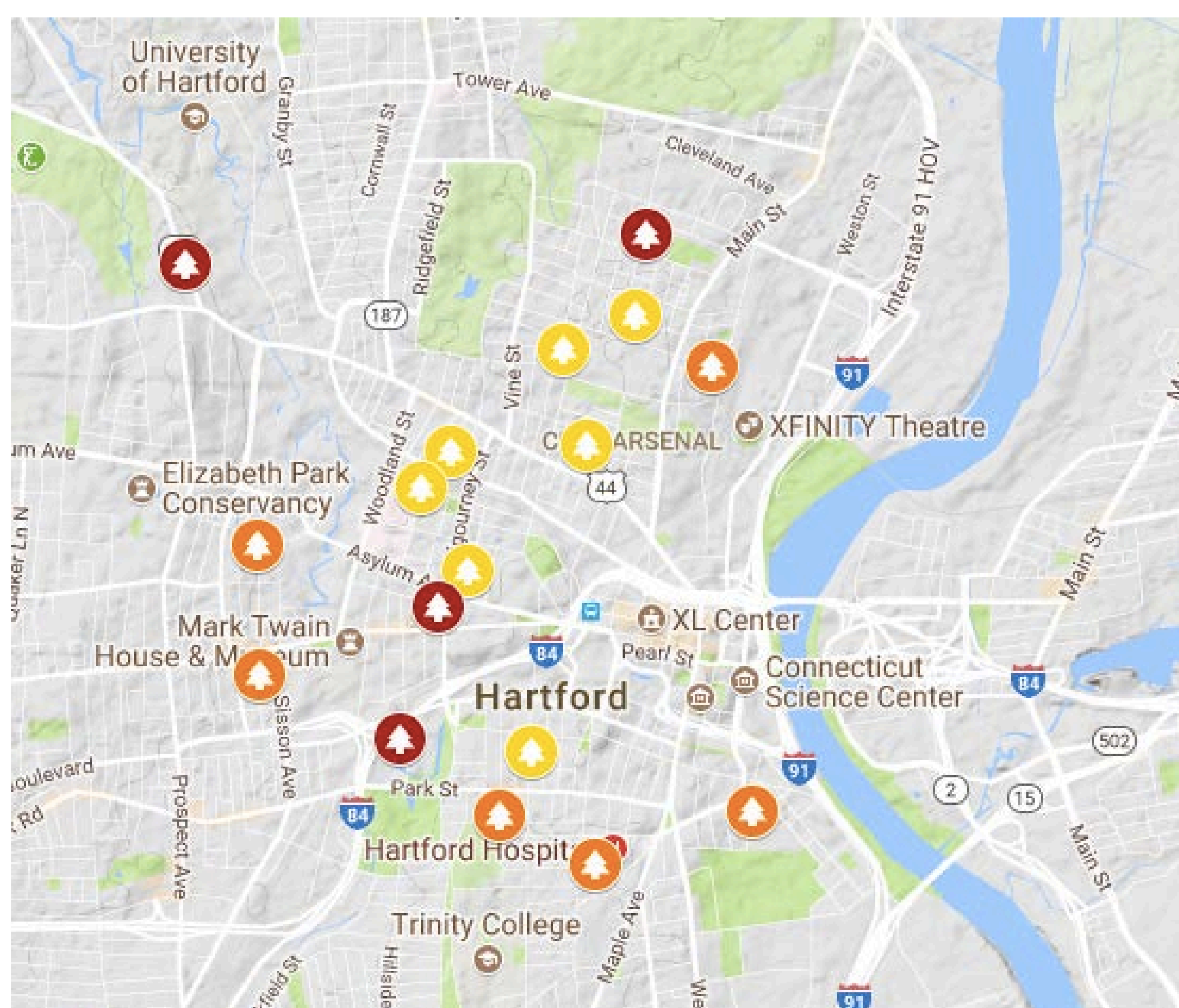


Figure 1: KNOX Garden Map showing location of gardens and level of amenities.

## FINDINGS

### BUILDING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

- In the past KNOX gardens hosted public, community events such as cookouts and parties. However, over time there has been a decline in the “sense of community” as a whole, directly affecting garden programming.
- Many interviews pointed to an acceptance of this change in community as simply a mark of the times. The drawbacks of this thinking are that it is a form of resignation.
- Interviews also indicated that the social aspect to community gardens is not of top priority for gardeners or KNOX; it is the physical use of garden plots that are prioritized.

### ADDRESSING DIVERSITY

- KNOX community gardens appeal to many Hartford residents for economic and historical reasons. 22.5% of the city population is foreign-born and minorities represent almost 80% of the population. KNOX states that since Hartford suffers from being a food desert, immigrants and other minorities find it is easier to grow their own (traditional) foods. This leads to each garden being unique.
- Gardener A, who gardens in a very ethnically diverse garden says that there is very little gardener interaction. However, Gardener B in a predominantly Hispanic garden says that people are very friendly and get along well. In both cases, there is very little interaction outside of the physical garden.

### DESIGNING SPACE AND PLACE

- Each KNOX community garden differs in shape and size, which adds to the uniqueness of its surrounding neighborhood. These variations in style have the ability to form the garden around the immediate environment to benefit the gardeners in the best way possible. However, there are drawbacks if the land doesn't have the ability to provide amenities such as tables, benches, and open spaces. Open social spaces, in particular, are what invoke natural bridging moments.
- There are clear differences between each KNOX garden, and each gardener uses the garden in different ways. Figure 2 shows in-ground and above-ground plots, a greenhouse, open space, a gazebo, benches, chairs, artwork, and parking, and the garden is fenced in. Figure 3 has above-ground plots and minimal open space.
- Another key difference between the gardens is the accessibility: some are curbside gardens, some have available parking, and some are gated with key access only, or on school property.

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**“The community gardens were pleasant, well they still are, but they have lost the social part. It’s just the change of the times I guess but no one is super friendly anymore.”**

**“You meet people but those social feelings are not as strong as they used to be, there used to be parties just to get together like cookouts and such but that is just gone now.”**

**“The garden in my mind should make things safer because everyone knows everyone, but I don’t see that happening. There used to be shared tools but they all got stolen.”**

**“We could be passing each other on the sidewalk and they [Burmese gardeners] know you from the garden obviously but they will not look or say hi or nothing.”**

**“The variety of foods in the gardens is incredible and it’s what we envisioned because people will obviously garden what their family eats. We started seeing this problem in the local grocery stores that don’t cater to all ethnicities in the neighborhood, so people use KNOX to counter the food desert type of problem in Hartford.”**



Figure 2: Earle Street Community Garden- Member of Red Group

**“There are benches and chairs but no one uses them, I go to the garden and work on my plants then I go home.”**

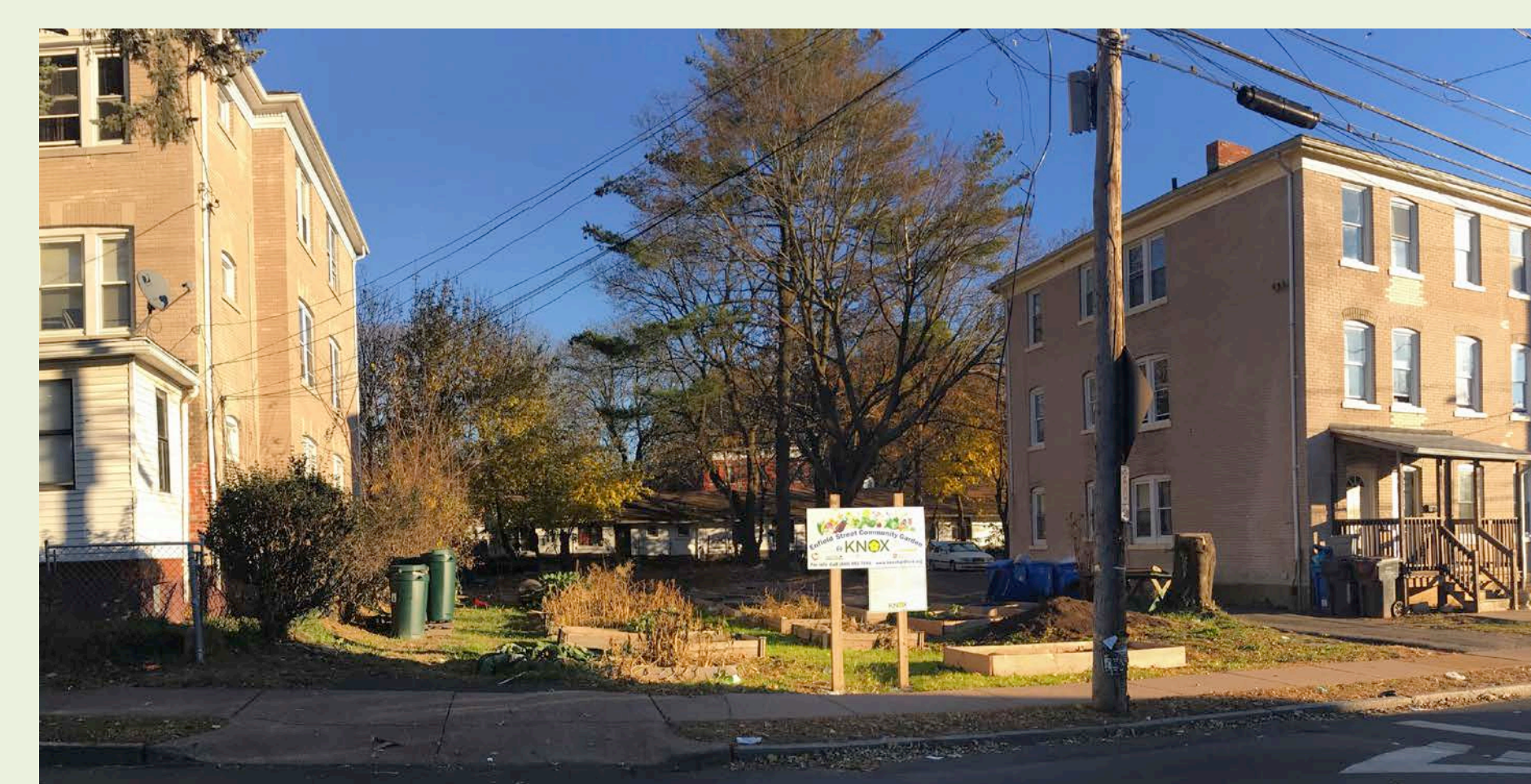


Figure 3: Enfield Street Community Garden- Member of Yellow Group

**“The garden is small, but I have my plot and that’s all I need to grow my food.”**

## DISCUSSION

Combating the Hartford food desert is a goal of KNOX, and through their community gardens they are successful in providing opportunities for urban gardeners to grow personal crops in their own neighborhood.

KNOX is currently in the role as a provider. A provider of space for Hartford residents to counter the food desert and a provider of bonding gardeners. To facilitate bridging, there needs to be cooperation between gardeners and KNOX to devise ways for improving social relationships, tackling diversity, and designing space and place.

Community gardens provide dual functioning spaces -- food production through the physical labor and social production through informal gardener networking. When both of these functions are prioritized social capital is increased and can bring job opportunities, reduction of violence, stronger community activism, and a better mental well-being to a neighborhood.

There is a lack of uniformity in gardens physical space, leading to a lack of uniformity among gardener experiences in the KNOX program. There should be variation in gardens to represent the individual neighborhoods; however, standard amenities that invoke more bridging possibilities, such as garden furniture and open spaces, should be present as well.

With the five prospective gardens for the upcoming season, planning should be adjusted to encourage social capital along with growing crops. This in turn can improve the lives of gardeners by creating larger networks for increased opportunities, both social and economic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Improving Social Relationships

- Community Potlucks/Cookouts
- Recreational Events- movie event, yoga retreats, art shows
- Spring seminar to explain community garden rules

### Addressing Diversity Challenges

- KNOX town hall meetings to address issues
- Ethnic food gardening workshops
- Community empowerment beyond gardening to include other non-profits

### Improving Space and Place

- Amenities such as benches and tables at all locations
- Additional visual aesthetics
- Garden chores

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