

How to build resilience into student-led food gardens

Video Script

Hi, I'm Bekki, and I have been a gardener for quite a while, and a student for even longer! A few years ago I set out to understand the impacts of students' transience in student-led food gardens and how to manage them. I was so interested in this that I made this the topic of my PhD. I've made this video to share with student gardeners, and I hope that it can provide some useful ideas for how to make these gardens the best they can be, even if the people running them keep graduating all the time. So here we go...

In the UK and all over the world, students are using their time at university to take action to make the world a more sustainable place.

However, there is a big difference between student grassroots initiatives and other grassroots initiatives in society. Students often move away from home to go to university and are therefore part of the university community for only a few years. And even during that time, students usually have periods of time away from the university, for example, for holidays and work placements. In other words, students are transient.

This transience causes some real problems for student-led sustainability initiatives. It causes short-term, irregular, and low participation. These problematic forms of participation then cause issues, like knowledge retention within the project, a constant need to recruit more participants, short-term thinking, and less social interaction. Often these also caused people to become frustrated, disappointed, and even judgmental.

On top of this, some of these issues actually increase problematic participation, or even other causes of problematic participation. For example, if people are frustrated, they might stop participating, or they might prioritise other commitments.

We know that students will always be transient because getting a degree is a time-limited activity. However, recent research has explored how the impacts of students' transience can be managed to help ensure the longevity of student-led food gardens connected to the Students Organising for Sustainability, or SOS, scheme called Student Eats. This was done to help these gardens to continue to contribute to sustainability and provide a space for students to learn about how to make change in society.

Some of the impacts of transience happen in the short term, but many also will affect student-led gardens over the long-term. Because of this, it makes sense to take actions that help deal with both short-term and long-term impact. But sometimes it's easy to forget to take actions that will have delayed impacts because the results may not be as immediate or concrete. But this means that they are even more important to prioritise because it means others might not do this.

So here are some things you can do to make your garden more resilient... in the short term... and the long term....

In the short term, try **running events and activities**. Organise weekly gardening sessions on a set day and time the whole year 'round. And create variety in you activities. In addition to gardening workshops, try running socials, for example. And make sure you have a balance between the 'core' gardening activities and 'recruitment' activities – not enough recruitment activities will mean participation might dwindle. Not enough gardening might mean your garden could become overgrown. Also, create different ways for people to take part – some people would like to be told what to do, and others might like to get creative. Create space for both!

Another strategy is to **nurture interest and creativity**. This means you should stay curious and experiment. Ask other gardeners what their vision of the space is. You can provide leadership and engage with people, even if you are not sure if it's your job to. This means you might want to be flexible, pay close attention, and sense into the needs of the group so you can create an atmosphere where people can engage in ways that suit them. You might also need to reassure others when they face challenges and become frustrated or disappointed. And do encourage people to take on a bigger role and coming back again. But remember, don't overburden yourself or others. Make sure you listen to others and help them. Try not to tell other people what to do. And remember, talk to people in person as much as possible – the garden is a great place for this!

An important way to build resilience into your garden is to **be open to learning and experimentation**. This is mostly because 'you don't know what you don't know'! Try thinking of learning as a process rather than an outcome – it is a journey, not a destination! And be patient with uncertainty, like whether or not other people will come to the garden or if you're not sure about what to do next. Experiment and try things out, because if you're unsure of something, the chances are that other people might be too! And don't worry too much if your actions don't have an impact right now. They might have an impact in future that you can't see yet, or it might take ten tries for an action to have impact. Don't stop on your ninth try! A big part of learning is reflection, and being open minded with people who might not think the same way as you. Try to be open-minded when working with others because you never know what you might learn from that interaction – even if it's an uncomfortable one!

Another way that can build resilience in your garden in the short-term is to make sure you **get support**. If you set up a good support system, this might also have longer-term effects! Reach out to your university and students union, Students Organising for Sustainability, knowledgeable gardeners, and other people you know. They can all offer support in different ways, like with knowing what to grow and how to grow it, making sure the garden's historical knowledge doesn't get lost through passing it forward to future generations of students, and even embedding the garden in the university's websites, calendars, and grounds management plans.

It can also help to **keep the garden well-maintained** to prevent building up a backlog of weeding, for example. And make sure you grow things that fit to the student calendar. For example, why not try growing low-maintenance crops that are either early or late cropping so that they are ready to harvest in the spring or the fall, rather than the summer?

Increasing the visibility of your garden can make more people aware of it. It can also make it feel like a more permanent feature of the university. Try advertising the garden through the student newspaper, social media, leafletting, emailing, blogging, and creating videos. You can also use social media to remind people to come to the garden on a weekly basis and to create lively conversations. But you can also make the garden more visible in person. For example, hand out your produce to your friends and spread the word about your garden in social conversations, too.

Another key task is to **recruit new participants**. One way this can be done by making the garden more visible. Ask your friends to come to the garden, but also try reaching out to people different from yourself. Make a point to target people who can stay involved for longer periods (such as postgraduate students, staff, first-year students, or any other people that might live on or around your campus). If you can find people who know how to garden, make a point of getting them to join as well! But also know that many of the people you reach out to might never show up. That's normal, so try not to let it bring you down!

Another way to build some resilience into your garden is to **create vibrancy and focus on what is valuable** for your garden. Try and find passion in your work and support others in finding theirs. Make sure that everyone gets to take part in the 'fun' bits of the garden and no one gets stuck organising everything. In general, try not to get side-tracked by activities that might not bring much value to your garden, such as too many committee meetings, or tasks that do not contribute to the vision of what your garden should be. Another key thing to pay attention to is to balance between trying to recruit more people to join the garden, and activities like gardening and socials. Too much focus on gardening and socials, then participation will drop off! But, too much focus on recruiting people, and there won't be any fun and the garden will get overgrown. You can show other people how vibrant your garden is with an impressive autumn harvest when the semester starts!

Also, make a point of trying to **connect** with other people and organisations, and link up to their interests. For example, help your students' union or university see the value of your garden by linking it with their current priorities, such as improving students' mental health or improving sustainability. Also try inviting other student societies to the garden or run activities together. This can make the gardening group feel more vibrant and might get more people involved. Also, try to act as a bridge between less active gardeners and your university, students' union, and Students Organising for Sustainability by building relationships and sharing information.

This leads into the next thing you can do, which is to make sure you **maintain healthy relationships & social networks**. Start with this in the garden by creating a lively and cohesive garden group. But remember to remain open to new people who want to take part so the garden doesn't seem too clique-y. You can do this by reaching out to befriend newcomers, staying positive, and trying not to judge or blame others if they don't 'pull their weight.' Also make sure that you are professional, timely, and patient when communicating with university or students' union staff. But if there is ever friction in the group or with university or students' union staff, make sure to try and resolve it as soon as possible. If you need help working with university or students' union staff, try reaching out to Students Organising for Sustainability.

An important way of making sure your garden can stay resilient over the long-term is to **plan** for your garden's future and **document** what happens each year. Basically, where has it come from and where is it going to? This makes it possible for someone new to come along and pick up where you left off, even if it has been a year or more since someone was looking after it. Plan for the future by envisioning what the garden should look like and create legacy strategies for the next generation of students. You can also try keeping records on what has been planted where each year to keep nutrients in the soil and stop the spread of disease, creating to-do lists or how-to guides like visual calendars, and keeping records in an uncomplicated way so they can be used in handovers between generations of gardeners and catch the eye of outsiders. All of this will help you create a story of your garden to share with others.

Finally, one of the best ways to make your garden resilient over the long-term is to **embed it in your university and students' union**. This is a way to carry the 'story' of your garden from one generation of gardeners to the next. You can do this by making your garden a student society (if you aren't already) and taking advantage of the funding or advertising provided by the students' union. If your students' union has a volunteering scheme, make sure to register your garden as a volunteering opportunity, too. Also try adding information about your garden to university calendars and webpages. Even if you leave the university, these will be left as a legacy so someone can pick up where you left off!

Participating in a student-led food garden is one way that you can make a contribution towards sustainability while you are at university. Every action towards sustainability matters and helps to create a culture of change!

I hope that you get to use these tips to help to make sure your garden is as impactful and as long-lasting as possible!

*Rebecca Laycock Pedersen
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