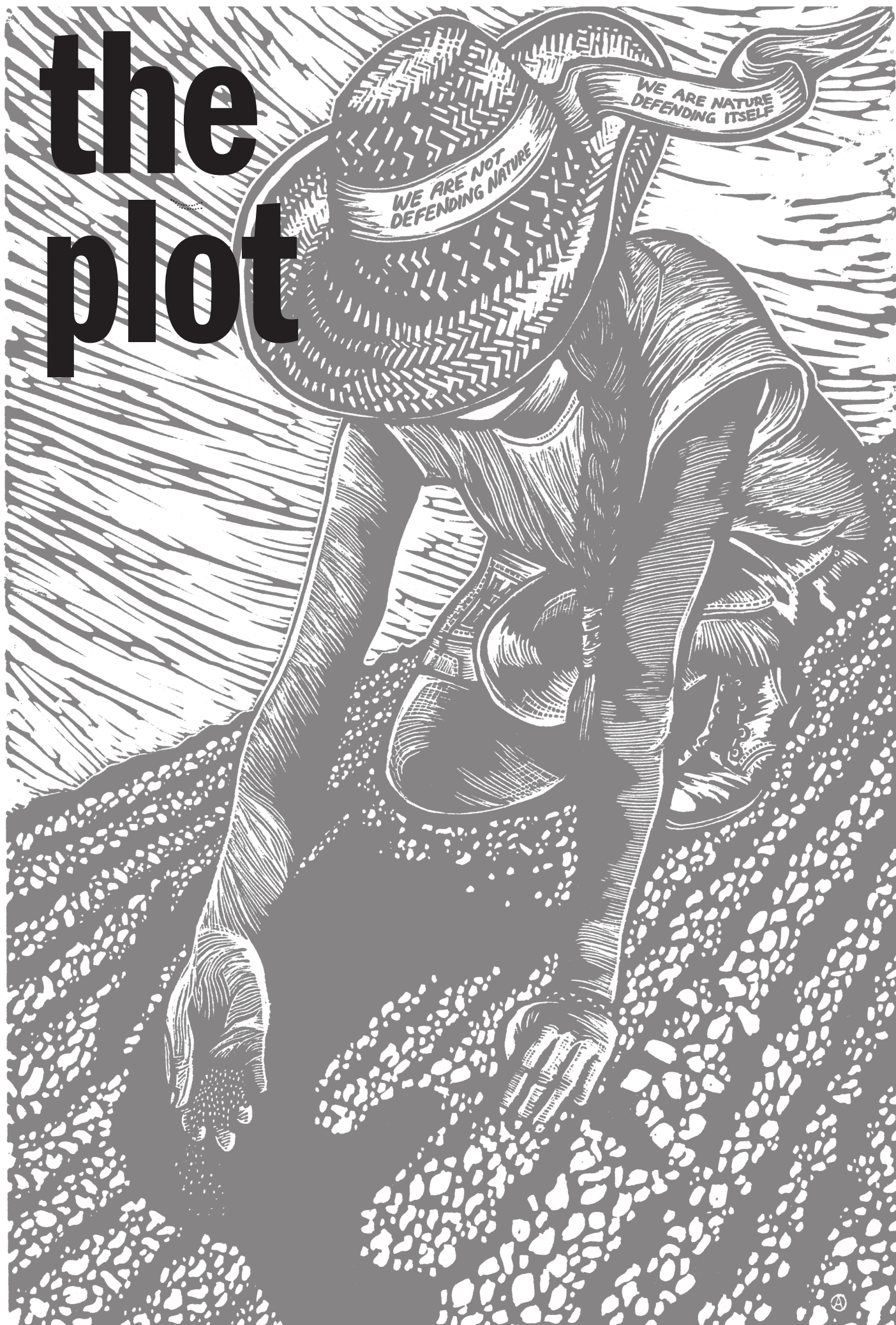


the plot



editorial

issue 4

This will be our fourth edition of The Plot: the London-based CFGN's printed newsletter to bring together current ideas and reflections around community food. With land ownership structures violently constraining access to land, food consumed in London travelling from all over the world, and competition with massive government subsidies to large-scale chemical farmers- often the content of The Plot pages stretch outside the M25.

In this edition we have a follow on piece by Ru Litherland from his article five years ago called "Where next for the community food movement?" In his new writing he explores how community food can participate in opposing austerity considering the movement's recent history. In a similar vein we hear a synopsis of a collaborative study mapping community food initiatives in London and how these findings will be put into practice in an urban agro-ecology framework. Finally we have a descriptive piece from Poppy Fishman explaining the new aquaponics system at Queen's Wood Community Garden- a technology that has created much debate amongst community food growers.

A phrase that seems to be at the root of community food growing is; "every community needs access to fresh, healthy foods." At a time of austerity cuts to community spaces and public service provision, and rising rents forcing people out of their homes- what are the ideas and practices that underpin community food projects to grow fruit & vegetable accessible for all? With your submissions the pages of The Plot can continue to be a place to listen to ideas, hear how people are putting these into practice and increase knowledge for fruitful harvests.

We look forward to future articles & pictures!

A massive thankyou to Joel for designing the past two newsletters, and for Marlene Barrett for sending a host of artwork.

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mapping the landscape

The current landscape of community food initiatives in London:
A collaborative study by Marina Chang, Priya Bhullar, Robert Biel,
Sarah Lo, Natalie Mandy, Redwann Mouihi, Dipa Patel & Alexander Stone

This research project focused on the mapping of the current landscape of community food initiatives in London and their role in the development of sustainable food systems.

The project adopted a collaborative approach, which involved data collection and data processing by a variety of members, both staff and students from University College London and the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University. This unique and interesting approach aimed to mirror some of the co-operative principles that the community initiatives in this project have at their core.

The 20 case studies in this project were chosen for a broad perspective on Alternative Agro Food Networks (AFNSs) emerging and already established throughout London. The criteria for selection of case studies included a) covering the entire food system-production, distribution, consumption and waste and b) diversity of community food initiatives with enterprising elements.

5 key findings

governance + decision-making

The study showed variability in the governance of initiatives. There is a strong sentiment that the initiatives are not constrained by co-operative legal framework and status. At the core of cooperative ideology is that decisions will categorically be brought about through consensus and democratic voting. Some initiatives found there to be difficulties in arriving at consensus and that a lack of true democracy led to internal tensions. Other initiatives demonstrated firm democratic control through organised meetings and group decisions.

community + financial models

Community food enterprise financial model,
The initiatives in this study followed varying financial models and there was some diversity in income streams and common pool resources and management. Many initiatives faced limitations due to lack of funding or other resources. This means that some initiatives were forced to adapt and innovate their financial income streams to be able to sustain themselves.

The importance of location community + identity

The importance of location and the principle of community and identity,
Community plays a significant role in all initiatives of this study. For some initiatives, there was a strong emphasis on the location of the initiative in establishing identity and sense of community. Other initiatives associated their sense of community with the wider surrounding area either their borough or part of London. For a few initiatives, community had little to do with location, but rather in relation to a wider community nationally or internationally

Vision, willingness + capacity to challenge the status quo

The vision, willingness and capacity to challenge the political and economic status quo,
Many initiatives felt they were willing and able to challenge the political and economic status quo by providing an alternative to the dominant food industry model. Other initiatives placed more importance on effecting change in their local community and region. Some initiatives felt that even if they wanted to challenge the status quo and be part of a wider food movement they were constrained by limitations such as financial resources, space, time, legitimacy etc.

Multiplicity at the core of each initiative

A large number of the initiatives showed a multiplicity of key objectives at their core. Many initiatives presented themselves as having an overall aim, but were in fact inextricably linked to other objectives. For example initiatives that aimed to redistribute surplus food in fact worked symbiotically to promote localised food networks, to encourage seasonality and to battle social and environmental issues.

As a continuation, the project team is keen to create a living lab for community food initiatives at the Calthorpe Project, King's Cross, Central London. This living lab aims to integrate research, education, community development, enterprise and public policy into a coherent force for change. The first attempt is to organise a workshop with two specific objectives: firstly, to share lessons learned on the issues of co-operation among community food initiatives and launch an online map of community food initiatives; and secondly, to develop an action plan to put into effect after the workshop.

WHERE NEXT NOW FOR THE COMMUNITY FOOD MOVEMENT

Ru Litherland, OrganicLea workers co_op (personal capacity)

Five years ago I wrote and circulated the article “Where Next for the Community Food movement?” (this can be found at <http://www.organiclea.org.uk/about/publications/>) Its purpose was: “to prompt myself and hopefully others active in community food projects to reflect, analyse, even discuss, where we are, where we want to get to, how we might set off there, and who’s bringing the sandwiches.” A number of conclusions were drawn, and a number of suggestions made. Now might be a fine time to look back on what’s happened since: below, five key issues are discussed.

Community Food Projects: Growth in Number, Scope and Impact

Firstly, it was noted that community food projects (hereafter referred to as CFPs) had grown significantly in number and scope, and that this was having positive social, health and environmental impact at a local level, and beginning to exert an impact on national culture and institutions. In the five years since, this momentum has continued. New projects continue to pop up all over the country, whilst many existing ones have increased their capacity, for example employing people to produce food and provide training, educational and therapeutic opportunities.

Whilst corporations like McDonalds and Sainsbury’s respond by trying to promote themselves as somehow close to the farmer in their false advertising, it’s a true story that grow-to-sell CFPs are finding easier routes to market through flourishing box schemes, farmers’ markets, independent processors, pubs and cafes.

This groundswell of public opinion and consumer action has, however, not been supported by many moves in the policy environment. Perhaps the biggest success has been, after years of campaigning, the inclusion of food growing in the National Curriculum as of September 2014.

Signs Of Movement!

The original essay stated, “CFPs are not a coherent movement, with shared ideas, organisation, aims and strategy.” It congratulated national organisations such as National Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens and SUSTAIN for their achievements and support, but made the distinction between “advocates” like these and the (lack of) networks of local, grassroots activism.

What happened next: in 2010, eight groups came together and formed the Community Food Growers’ Network (CFGN). Over the following year we developed our organisation and processes, and our aims. The manifesto (<http://www.cfgn.org.uk/manifesto/>) sums this up nicely.

In the five years since, CGFN have kept going and growing. Seasonal gatherings are held every quarter where members come together for mutual support, celebration and planning; and hundreds of people have attended our regular public events. Social media; The Plot; appearances in national media; and our beautiful banners, posters and pamphlets means recognition of CFGN as a kind of “political wing” of London’s community gardens stretches well beyond community food growers.

I can’t pretend to have done much research for this piece, but I’m aware of the loose network of projects in Oxford, who most notably organise to put on the annual Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC). Starting as an alternative the big NFU and corporate sponsored Farming Conference, ORFC aimed to return communities and environment to the heart of food growing. Last year ORFC attracted more people than the “mainstream” event. We are on the move!

The Bluefinger Alliance arose in Bristol last year to defend allotment, community garden and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) land from being built on for the council’s Metrobus scheme. The campaign was impressive, the scenes of protestors camping up trees reminiscent of the roads protest movement of the 1990s, but to lose our first big confrontation, in one of the country’s strongholds of alternative food activism, is quite a blow.

Philosophical Currents Within Community Food Projects

One of the number of reasons cited for CFPs’ apparent slowness to combine was that, beyond the very direct local benefits of a CFP, participants can attach quite different meanings to their involvement. Divergent ideas, opinions, even philosophies, abound. The four main positions can be characterised, or perhaps caricatured, as the “Four Rs:”

Reaction: a harking back to some Golden Age;
Retreat: a sheltering in individual self-sufficiency as a response to the Crisis;
Reform: the pursuit of piecemeal social and environmental improvements; and
Revolution: a belief that the Crisis is systemic, so a transformation of whole systems is required.

It was argued that our aims should be “progressive”, i.e. Forwards, not Back, to the Land!, but whether discussions have shifted the centre of

gravity more towards one position than another, is another discussion!

Forwards to the Land!

It was suggested that the issue of land, its access, ownership, use and control, is a concern common to all CFPs, and could provide a key focal point to take action “beyond the garden”. As we approach CFGN’s Summer Gathering, and members vote to decide on the network’s first Annual Campaign, it is interesting that the nominations reflect a broader concern around land and property.

Whilst CFGN has no formal affiliation with housing rights groups or Land Workers’ Alliance, some members have been active across this spectrum, and we have shared platforms, events and actions with them.

Connecting With a Broader Movement

It was muted that, even on finding shared political aim, for CFPs to be effective they would do well make common cause with a broader social movement/s. Examples were given of how CFPs have played a valuable role in a wider movement.

The Land Workers’ Alliance, mentioned above, was founded in the UK since CFGN, and as members of La Via Campesina they provide a link into the international movement for the rights of small farmers. This has been a fascinating development. In the meantime, the Tory win in the last election signals a likely ramping up of public spending cuts and property speculation, which spells hard times for London communities.

One way or another, CFPs will be effected by this situation, but as a small, fragile-yet-resilient movement, we stand to play a vital role in opposing austerity: by practically demonstrating how, in hard times in the hard city, people can come together to meet their basic needs, with generosity, ecological sensitivity and joy.



QUEEN'S WOOD COMMUNITY GARDEN

Poppy Fishman, Head Grower,
Queen's Wood Community Garden

A sustainable system to show Londoners how a café can grow it's own food! Queens Wood Café is a community café in North West London dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the local environment. It's aims include enriching the lives of visitors by providing an enticing range of wholesome, homemade food and drinks at affordable prices.

The award winning community garden behind the garden is maintained by a committed group of volunteers who share garden knowledge and assist in growing fresh, seasonal veggies for the café.

The most recent addition to the community garden are 30 Rudd and Karp fish in an Aquaponics system.

Aquaponics is a sustainable food production system that combines Hydroponics (growing plants in water) and Aquaculture (rearing fish or aquatic creatures in tanks or ponds.)

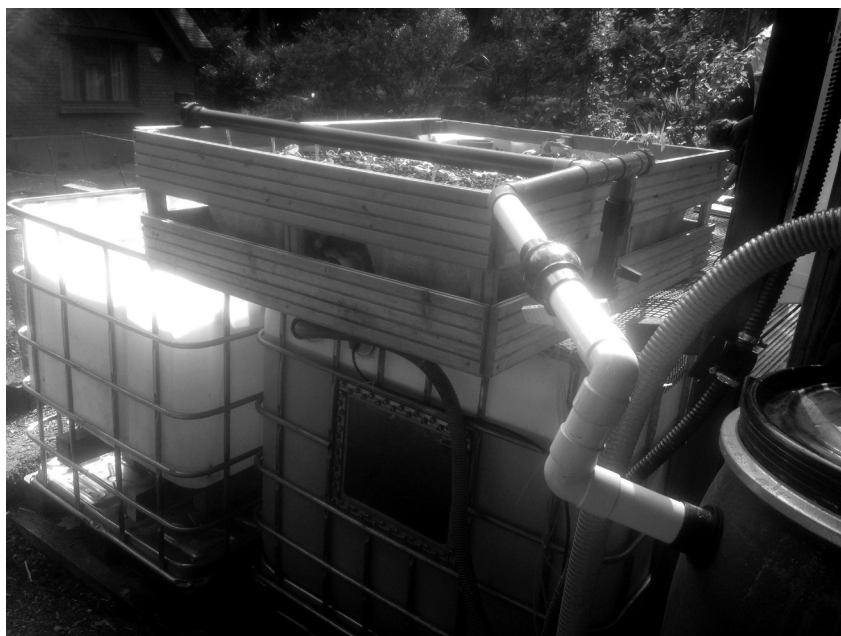
Cultivating both in the same system creates a closed loop system. The cycle involves the ammonia in fish waste, breaking down into nitrates and nitrites to feed the plants. The water is pumped round, purifying and releasing oxygen for the fish. Some additional water and fish food is added to the system and electricity is used to circulate the water in the tank. This particular system relies on the sun to heat the water and give sunlight to the plants with no additional lighting.

Many aquaponic systems also include growing and harvesting veggies and fish. At Queen's Wood the fish will stay in the tank to assist in growing salad greens and other veggies for the cafe.

www.queenswoodcafe.co.uk/aquaponics

We are a network of community gardens around London actively engaged in growing food plants, putting land into community use, and supporting others to grow food in healthy, sustainable ways.

We have 4 seasonal gatherings a year to share news, plans and to organise on relevant issues. Membership is free and you can find more information, news and upcoming events on our website.



Community Food Growers Network

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