Veggies in Verges: A Policy Inventory for Footpath Food Gardens across Greater Sydney

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Introduction

What if edible plants would grow along our footpaths, in verges or nature strips along the road? Underutilized spaces, like grassed verges, are an underexplored opportunity for urban agriculture. In light of increasing awareness to the consequences of climate change, limited fossil fuel resources and a growing urban population, calls for food system change (FAO, 2019) and 'healthy cities' (UN Habitat and WHO, 2020) are on the global agenda. As one way to address these challenges, urban agriculture, growing food within urban areas, is promoted.

Footpath food gardens or verge gardens are a form of urban food gardens, primarily non-commercial urban agriculture (Ulm, 2020). They offer benefits towards human and ecological health, climate adaptation and mitigation and community building (Säumel, Weber and Kowarik, 2016; Kingsley *et al.*, 2021). However, previous research in Australian cities found a lack of support for urban food gardens from policy and urban planning (Pires, 2011; Thornton, 2017). In their research on verge gardening behaviour in Melbourne, Marshall, Grose and Williams (2020) found that people's perception of council's attitudes strongly influenced their decision-making. Thus, council policies can become a barrier to verge gardening, influencing the implementation of food systems in cities.

This case study examines attitudes of councils towards verge gardening in Greater Sydney. A quantitative and qualitative comparison on the widely differing policy approaches to verge gardening is conducted through content analysis of publicly available policy documents of the 35 councils in Greater Sydney. The research questions include: What are council attitudes towards edible plants in verge gardening? Are the policy approaches cautious and risk averse or explicitly aiming to reduce barriers? Understanding how Australian councils are reacting to the growing trend of verge gardening with policies regulating their management is a crucial step towards healthier and greener streets, and widespread urban agriculture in the city.

Why Verge Gardening?

The verge is the space between the private lot boundary and the road kerb (Kingsley *et al.*, 2021). It can contain a footpath, grassed nature strips or both. The verge is publicly owned but residents at the adjoining property are often required to maintain a grassed nature strip. In some areas, residents can apply to plant something else apart from lawn or introduce planters on top of footpaths, thus creating so-called verge gardens. They are also known as public gardens, nature strip gardens, street

gardens, or footpath gardens. Verge gardens are at the intersection between private and public, on publicly owned land but privately maintained. So how can policies balance the shared responsibilities for verge gardens, reimagining verges beyond the standard lawn or concrete footpath?

Research on verge gardening policies is significant for two main reasons. First, verge gardens are a small and scalable nature-based solution to tackling some of the current challenges in society: climate change, food security, public and environmental health. More importantly, street verges are oftentimes underutilised space. Thus, small-scale urban agriculture in the road verge can be implemented without competing with other uses for precious urban land. Verge space is not to be underestimated. Grassed verges comprise a third of green open space in Australian cities (Marshall, Grose and Williams, 2019).

Second, verge gardening policies are an example of emerging models of collaborative governance. This trend in public policy towards seeing the state as an "enabler" rather than "provider" can be investigated through verge gardening. Wider academic and public debates that verge garden policies relate to are: Who is responsible for upkeep of the streets? What is ownership? What is public and private? Research in verge gardens shows that the distinction between public and private ownership and responsibility is not clear cut and people perceive concepts of public and private as overlapping complexities (Blomley, 2005). How councils attempt to navigate these complexities in different ways is demonstrated in our case study on policy approaches by councils within Greater Sydney.

Case Study: Greater Sydney

Greater Sydney residents have been growing food in verges for over a decade in some parts of the city (Mobbs *et al.*, 2020). These gardening practices prompted some councils to introduce policies regulating verge gardens. Our analysis found, however, that about half of the 35 local government areas of the metropolitan area of Greater Sydney have *no* explicit regulatory policy on verge gardening. Of those who do have a regulatory policy it varies significantly in form and content. Some councils have detailed street garden planting guidelines, while others dedicate a paragraph to verge gardens in their nature strip maintenance policy that focusses on lawn.

Many councils require checklists to be submitted, sometimes requiring neighbours' signatures, before approval is granted for verge gardens. Some councils collect approval or annual permit fees, creating barriers to verge gardening. Meanwhile, other councils remove the need for prior approval, asking for registration of the garden after its establishment, and providing resources. There is a general reluctancy towards allowing edible plants in verge gardens. Few councils in Greater Sydney explicitly permit or prohibit planting edible plants. Many do not consider food plants and some councils that are generally supportive of verge gardening, do not

recommend growing edible plants in verge gardens: “Growing food plants on the verge is not recommended mainly due to the risks associated with soil contamination” (Inner West Council, 2020, p. 1). However, other council policies address these risks in various ways, for example requiring raised planters for food plants or soil testing.

In summary, the policy approaches of local governments in Greater Sydney to edible verge gardening vary significantly.

Conclusion

By raising awareness for the different policy approaches, this research aims to spark a discussion on shaping the future policy responses to edible verge gardening. Creating small-scale edible gardens along our streets is a step towards establishing urban agriculture, a vital element of healthy and sustainable future cities.

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