

Preliminary Overview of Community Orcharding in the U.S.

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

A new alternative food project on the rise, community orcharding, unites volunteers through fruit and nut trees to contribute to their community’s food security, knowledge of food production, and environmental health. This increasingly popular use of public space remains largely absent from this literature (Nordahl, 2009). We conducted a qualitative, inductive survey of community orchard organizations in the U.S. to establish a baseline understanding. We asked:

1. What is driving rise of community orcharding projects in the U.S.?
2. How are the organizations impacting local food systems?

METHODS

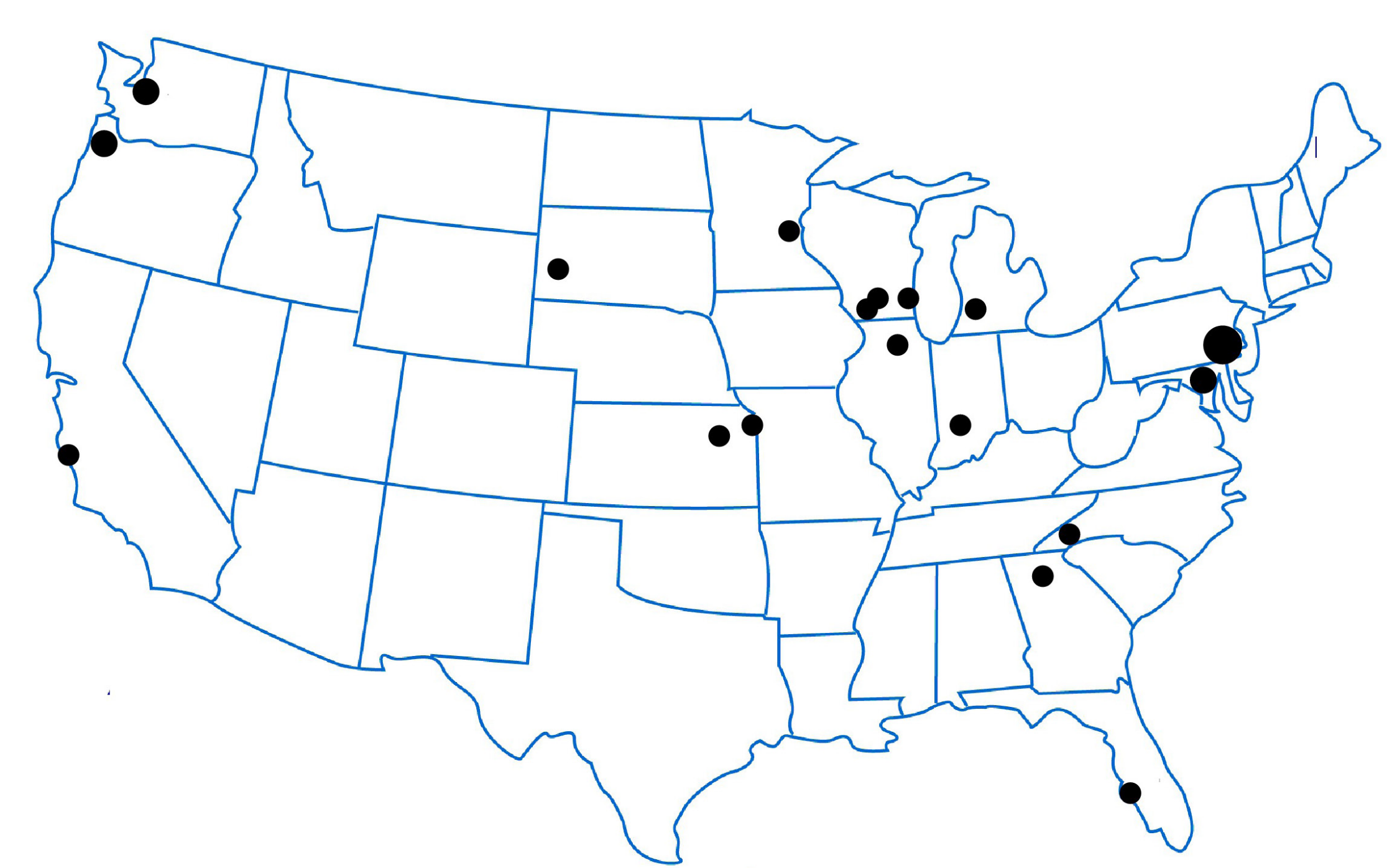
Community orchards were identified through social media groups, internet keyword searches, and an initial list established using Clark and Nicholas’s (2013) discussion of urban fruit forestry. Over 70 orchards were identified and invited to participate in a web-based questionnaire. Communication with potential respondents followed a modified Tailored Design Method (Dillman et al. 2011) that included four separate communications. Of the 68 community orchard organizers who received the questionnaire, 36 followed the link; 29 were usable (response rate of 42.64%).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

We conducted descriptive analysis, coding thematically. Inductive codes were developed that focused on three themes: environment, education, and a sense of community.

Organization profile

- 72% orchards have land that was at least partially owned by the city (parks and recreation)
- 10 respondents: unique community orchards
- 19 respondents: affiliates of an organization with multiple community orchard sites
- Size ranged from 0.12 to 5.5 acres
- 25 respondents listed “dawn to dusk” or comparable parks hours as times the community orchard is open to the public
- 27% said their organization received all funding from one source



Participant profile

Those in leadership positions reflected the core critique of alternative food movement projects—that such projects prioritize “good” foods and choices, but those foods and choices coded as “good” are also those coded as white (Delind, 2011).

	Respondents	National Average <small>(United States Census Bureau, 2014)</small>
White	96%	63%
Household income \$50,000+	48%	53.25%
Bachelor's	45%	18.7%
More than Bachelor's	48%	11.4%
Female	64%	51%

Drivers in community orchard establishment and organization

1. **Concern for the environment:** 13 respondents described the orchard management style as permaculture; others largely described the management style as sustainable or organic. 10 respondents said participating in urban native restoration activities was a part of the community orchard’s activities. Such activities may contribute to the community development and connectedness that alternative food projects aim to create.
2. **Education:** 90% of respondents said educating the community was an organizational goal. Topics of education included how to care for fruit trees, when and how to harvest fruit, and how to support native plants and pollinators. 72% of respondents listed skill sharing as an educational outcome; this has potential to extend the impact of community orcharding beyond the primary site.

3. **Sense of community:** This concept was closely tied to the motivation *education*, leading us to believe that improving food security may function as a secondary outcome of the site. Sense of care and trust were primary concerns for respondents, manifesting in hours the site is open to the public and how respondents discuss theft and vandalism. Respondents generally argued that the fruit was open for the public, and that rather than theft or vandalism, the greatest risk to the trees was a lack of knowledge on how to tend and harvest from the trees.

Community orchards & the local food system

While 76% of respondents listed increasing food security as a goal of their organization, attempts to pull together excerpts on food security failed. Terms like access, food desert, food security, nutrition, and poverty were used minimally. Community orchard projects are working to increase access to healthy food, but whether such efforts reach those currently without access or who identify as food insecure remains unclear.

Recommendations for community orchardists and their partners

- Community orchards’ face challenges in serving those who are food insecure when limited diversity exists in organizational leadership.
- Those most likely to be food insecure are also most likely to have limited leisure time for volunteer activities.
- Meaningfully incentivizing work may provide reasonable opportunities.



- Developing lasting partnerships may play a key role in the long-term viability of community orchard management.
- Responses show a lack of diversity in fundraising portfolios that could put the organization’s operations at future risk.
- A wide volunteer base is essential to support community orchards.

CONCLUSIONS

Alternative food projects are being critiqued for reinforcing white, affluent spaces of “good” food and reinforcing a choice-based, neoliberal ideology in place of food system reform (Agyeman & McEntee, 2014). While demographic information gathered from community orchard organizers showed the organizations may indeed be sites where whiteness and affluence are performed, this must be explored further by looking at the locations of the orchards within their community and the demographics of those who participate in the community orcharding. The variety of distribution methods used and the goals beyond fruit production, such as community building and orcharding education, discussed by our respondents demonstrate that food security and teaching individuals to select “good” foods are not the primary concern of community orchards in the U.S. Instead, the organizations are emphasizing the skills of fruit production and restoration of the local environment. Therefore, the potential outcomes and outputs of community orchards may be distinct from those of other alternative food projects and require different questions to better understand the community being built.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the orchards who participated in this research and the Indiana University School of Public Health - Bloomington for funding support of the research.

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