

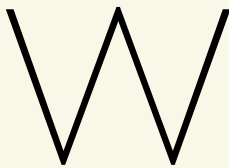


GROWING COMMUNITY

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*Homegrowing is a sustainable cornerstone of many lives, producing fantastic food while improving the physical and mental health of a growing community. **Cynthia Caruana** is currently completing a Ph.D. research project in which she investigates these holistic benefits and forms strategies to help new growers. She speaks with **THINK**'s **Jonathan Firbank** about what it takes to home-grow, and what homegrowing gives back.*





Wherever there's a little space and time to tend

it, people have found solace in homegrowing. Growing your own food is a fundamental part of who we are. The process is embedded in our history, influencing how we relate to ourselves and each other. Its benefits – those beyond the simple work-to-food equation – have been understood for millennia. However, things understood since olden days are often understood in old-fashioned ways. Homegrowing is rarely a viable primary food source nowadays, and often competes with modern lifestyles. But the self-improvement, self-esteem, and community developed by homegrowing is too often understated. Another conversation proving too quiet concerns the strategies we need to reintegrate homegrowing into over-optimised lives. So, the question is this: how exactly are lives improved by homegrowing, and how can we start?

Cynthia Caruana is completing her Ph.D. under the supervision of

Dr Censu Caruana at UM's Centre for Environmental Education and Research. Her project combines two things required to reintegrate homegrowing into our lives. First, the need for more quantitative and qualitative data on homegrowing. Second, the need for planning and training resources for those who are new to food cultivation. Caruana's interest in the subject began with teaching work. It's easy for us to forget, but some of the most impactful and communal homegrowing happens on school grounds, as we are taught about our environment. As Caruana puts it, 'I'm a teacher. I have spent ten years teaching biology at a government school. This led me to a master's in sustainability within schools, and following from that, I took on a new job as an Eco-Schools teacher.'

Eco-Schools, known locally as EkoSkola, serves as a global framework for Education for Sustainable Development, fostering a transformative educational environment that empowers students of all ages to become active agents of change within their communities. It has throughlines

that continue in her current work, a holistic interest in the contact points between community and sustainability, and an action-oriented approach. 'One project I found particularly inspiring was called *We Eat Responsibly!* – a multinational effort to make use of unused land on school grounds. Seeing those spaces being used so positively was a joy to see.' Nonetheless, Caruana wanted to apply these lessons beyond schools, amidst a broader area throughout our communities. Another source of inspiration came with the global lockdowns, as the pandemic led to mass interest in hobbies with a self-care element. Homegrowing was no exception. The limited areas people were confined to were often transformed into green spaces for the betterment of people's physical and mental health.

THE BENEFITS OF HOMEGROWING

It is easy to think reductively about homegrowing. As it is a productive act, we might overly focus on its product. Homegrown produce is, of course, often better



than a shop-bought alternative. It is free from the constraints of mass production, and the homegrower does not need to sacrifice flavour or quality in service to efficiency. But a normative household would

be hard-pressed to homegrow a significant proportion of its own food, due to modern limitations on free time and green space. 'I don't think that on a family level, growing on a small scale could

produce enough food for self-sufficiency. However, the literature shows numerous advantages beyond that. For example, a positive impact on one's mental wellbeing, or knowing that your work has resulted in something pesticide-free.' As with other hobbies, homegrowing is more about the journey than the destination. The process has a host of physical and mental health benefits. These range from the intuitively beneficial fresh air and exercise, to the subtler balms like engaging more deeply with seasonal change.



Cynthia Caruana

ALLOTING METHODOLOGIES

As such, Caruana's first research question was 'to see what motivates people to grow their own food, and to understand the challenges they face.' She notes that her research 'uses a mixed-methodology approach, with this first stage being a quantitative survey.' This survey also yielded data relating to the identification of different settings in which homegrowing takes place. It's very easy to assume that homegrowing essentially means >



private allotments and gardens, but as educators like Caruana will understand, schools are a crucial environment. Here, the holistic benefits are more pronounced, as homegrowing in schools is explicitly educational. 'Next is to identify strategies,' Caruana says, noting that these would be tailored to specific settings and benchmarked against UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development practices. This is done in order to 'promote homegrowing and its many established advantages.' Caruana specifically lists education on sustainability among these strategies, due to it being an important part of early curricula.

Caruana has completed this first phase of her research: 'I have compiled massive amounts of results, which will need to be filtered since, obviously, some tests don't yield significant results. I'm working on filtering these at the moment, while also working on a thematic analysis of interviews.' This is essentially the second stage of Caruana's work, with the third and final stage being 'action-oriented'. 'We can talk forever, but unless there is something impactful which leads to clear

action, I feel as though the project would be missing something.'

To that end, Caruana plans to present a training program with the dual role of promoting homegrowing and informing its implementation. This follows some groundwork: a qualitative investigation of an existing program, and surveying participants to better understand what does and does not work. Finally, the very last part of Caruana's research 'is the implementation of a community garden' – a process which is well underway. 'This is a new initiative which connects a school and an elderly residence.' The intergenerational aspect of this underscores a crucial point. With a community garden, 'community' can be the operative word. As people interact over a shared project, communal growing spaces break the increasingly stratified age gaps in our culture. Information and produce are exchanged regularly in these spaces, sparking and sustaining neighbourliness and friendship. This may prove a subtle antidote to the growing isolation of the 21st century.

At this point, a piece of unused land has been divided into plots

and an expression of interest was issued to students and their families for those who want to grow their food here. 'Through observation and discussion, I am implementing a kind of iterative cycle.' Insights from this process will inform the aforementioned training program. 'I'm trying to see what works, observing the knowledge they gain and the advice they give.'

COMMUNAL FEEDBACK

Qualitative feedback is vital to this multi-stage process. Engaging with biodiversity was brought up as a particularly strong reward. One family mentioned that gardening a plot gave their children time 'away from gadgets' – an increasingly rare boon. But conversely, communal gardening is compatible with digital communication. The gardeners Caruana works with make use of a group chat, sharing photos of interesting flora and fauna as well as tips to overcome the challenges that beset any garden. 'The fabric of the community really comes together in these moments, which particularly helps encourage newer gardeners.' This help is a crucial part of homegrowing. Caruana finds



Small-scale growing from different contexts including pots on a rooftop, a school setting and a community garden. *Photos courtesy of Cynthia Caruana*



that gardeners are far less likely to quit when they share information and resources, suggesting that a communal effort results in more than the sum of its parts.

Another recurring point of interest is the need to 'start small' – something that is mentioned in feedback and has proved strategically successful. It makes homegrowing iterative and manageable, averting the chance that a new gardener may feel overwhelmed by the work they've taken on. Given that the benefits are holistic (having as much to do with socialising and self-esteem as putting food on the table), this approach might be a particularly effective way of enriching one's life. It is also highly compatible with the main impediment to self-sustainability – available space.

'Space can be a problem for homegrowing, but I've had the opportunity to speak with local

councils who might have space available for communal gardens.' Caruana also mentions vertical wall gardens, which are a beautiful addition to any urban environment. However, she notes that greening projects rarely, if ever, allocate space for communal growing and recalls that two rare Maltese ventures into public allotments were short-lived. This was likely due to a lack of coordination and strategy – a void that Caruana's work seeks to fill.

'I will provide the groundwork for what motivates homegrowers and how best to overcome their challenges,' Caruana says. Still, she is keenly aware that her research is, itself, part of a broad community of effort and ideas. 'There needs to be a mix of good strategies, available space and technical expertise for homegrowing to really work. That's what it will take if we want to break ground in Malta.' 