

# **Mapping foodscapes in Athens:** The role of urban gardens in fresh food provisioning

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by

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## Summary

This thesis focused on the exploration of the food provisioning role of urban gardens in Athens, their relation to other food sources, and how lived experiences tied to these practices influence gardeners' overall relationship with food. The brief history of urban gardening in Greece, combined with the limited available literature, which has largely studied gardens through the lens of the socioeconomic crisis more than a decade ago, no longer reflects current realities. Additionally, the role of urban gardens in food provisioning has not previously been researched from the framework of foodscapes, a perspective that examines both the physical qualities of these spaces and the symbolic meanings behind food practices. By focusing on the stories and experiences of urban dwellers, the purpose of this study was to contribute to a deeper understanding of gardens' importance within the wider food provisioning system, as well as their importance at societal and individual levels.

A qualitative and ethnographic approach enabled participant observation, narrative, and walking interviews that offered insights into participants' personal stories and experiences. Mapping was another tool used for illustrating personal foodscapes. These methods helped with the understanding of the tangible and intangible dimensions of the role of gardens, which were analysed through a theoretical framework that combined the concept of foodscapes with Lefebvre's notion of "the right to the city", focusing on meanings, practices, and lived experiences.

Through garden visits and conversations with participants, the research revealed the role gardens play within participants' broader foodscapes and how they relate with other provisioning methods. Despite having a complementary purpose in terms of quantity, gardens offered a diverse range of benefits. They represent spaces for relaxation, escape from the city, socializing and celebration, while providing access to organic, seasonal, and tasty fresh food, connected to emotions of pride and care. Food grown in the garden, as a result was considered "sacred" distinguishing it from food sourced elsewhere.

Gardens also emerged as spaces of resistance against dominant urban structured and conventional food production systems. The act of growing food fostered the practice of citizenship and claimed the right to a different city shaped by inhabitants' food desires. These practices evoked memories from the past reminiscing of life in the village too. The emotional dimensions of gardening presented in this study further explained how participation in those spaces enabled connections with nature, culture, memory, and community.

Mapping the foodscapes of Athenian gardeners demonstrated how various food provisioning methods interconnect within the city's wider food geography. Urban gardens were found to influence everyday food practices, including cooking and planning, which were often embedded within gendered divisions of labour. Overall, the foodscapes presented in this thesis highlight that urban gardening in Athens is a multidimensional practice that reshapes how people interact

with food, and at the same time forms an ecosystem of care, connection, and autonomy within the complex foodscape of the city.

## Preface

For the past almost four years my relationship and knowledge around food and food provisioning methods have been noticeably influenced by my life in Wageningen and more specifically, in the student community of Droevendaal where I currently live. Surrounded by students and people who are passionate about environmentally and socially just food systems as well as places where local and organic food is cultivated, I gained a lot of new knowledge on topics that I highly value and care about.

Maintaining a home-garden with my housemates and being subscribers to the local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm called Nieuwe Ronde, gave me the opportunity to learn how to grow food, take care of it, harvest it and cook delicious as well as nutritious meals. These practices also sparked memories from my childhood when my grandma used to maintain a vegetable garden at my ancestral village during the summer months. Home-grown food tasted real and was full of flavour.

Encountering initiatives such as urban community gardens and allotment gardens, around the Netherlands, was a new concept for me. The practice of growing food in the city, among concrete buildings and busy roads seemed like a new world that I wanted to know more about. Since Athens, is the biggest city of Greece and the one with the most urban garden initiatives it felt appropriate to do my fieldwork there.

Due to these encounters, it became clear to me what I want my thesis research topic to be. Coming from a country like Greece where food culture is quite distinct and fresh food has a central place in everyday life, I was intrigued to investigate the relations between urban citizens, gardens and other food sourcing methods. Growing up in a household where most food comes from the open-air markets; I learned from a young age to interact with the sellers and the environment while visiting these vibrant spaces. I was always fascinated to notice and absorb all the colours, sounds, smells and interactions I would experience in those spaces.

Both the practice of reclaiming urban space and the act of growing food, especially within the city, can be recognized as impactful forms of resistance to capitalistic and conventional notions of how modern urban life should be organized. Inspired by Lefebvre ideas, transforming the city according to people's needs and desires requires reimagining and reclaiming it through active participation. Urban gardening can be one such pathway. In this thesis, I explore and present its role within the foodscapes of the city.

# Table of Contents

Summary .....	1
Preface.....	3
Table of Contents .....	4
Table of figures .....	5
Introduction.....	6
Problem statement.....	7
Contextual information & Literature Review .....	9
Research Questions .....	15
Conceptual lens.....	16
Foodscapes.....	16
Lefebvre’s notion of “the right to the city” .....	18
Meanings and experiences around food practices .....	20
Methodology .....	21
Data collection & Analysis .....	21
Ethical issues & Limitations .....	26
Findings.....	28
Part I: Motivations behind urban dwellers choosing urban gardens in Athens.....	28
Part II: The role of urban gardens in fresh food provisioning and everyday food practices	
Food provisioning role of urban gardens .....	31
Part III: The right to a different city and the memories of the village .....	35
Part IV: The emotional, ecological, and cultural meanings of urban gardens .....	42
Part V: Mapping urban gardeners’ personal (gendered) foodscapes and provisioning	
methods.....	46
Discussion.....	51
Therapeutic and socialising aspects of urban gardens in Athens.....	51
The food provisioning role of urban gardens and ecosystems of care.....	52
The right to a different city expressed through memories of the village and food desires ...	53
The emotional and cultural meanings of urban gardens and the connection with nature and	
traditions .....	55

Conclusion .....	59
Limitations .....	61
Future Research Recommendations.....	61
References.....	63

## Table of figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Personal items of gardeners in municipal vegetable garden in Agioi Anargyroi, Athens, February 2025. ....	30
<b>Figure 2.</b> Municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi in Athens, 2014. Photo received by one of the gardeners of the garden. ....	35
<b>Figure 3.</b> Demolished municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi, Athens, February 2025.	36
<b>Figure 4.</b> Trofotopia self-organised food market at Vyronas squat in Athens, February, 2025. .	40
<b>Figure 5.</b> Navarinou Park in Exarcheia, Athens, February 2025. ....	41
<b>Figure 6.</b> Remaining broccolis at the garden of Navarinou park in Exarcheia, Athens, February 2025.....	41
<b>Figure 7.</b> Gardener foraging wild greens at the self-organised garden in Vrilissia, Athens, March 2025.....	43
<b>Figure 8.</b> A gardener showing me wild greens found in their plots, Athens, February 2025.....	44
<b>Figure 9.</b> Illustrated foodscape map showcasing the different food provisioning methods of urban gardeners in Athens. ....	47
<b>Figure 10.</b> Urban dweller going back home after shopping at laiki, Athens, March, 2025.....	76

# 1. Introduction

Urban community gardens have been recognised as places that foster local food production, community building and serve as acts of reclaiming land, while also challenging conventional ideas of how urban spaces should look like (Baudry, 2012). In addition to providing direct fresh food, urban gardens' contribution to the mental and physical health of urban dwellers, social cohesion and promotion of healthy food practices has been well known and studied for the past decades (Egerer et al., 2024). Urban agriculture initiatives can also facilitate public engagement and learning about food production and consumption (McClintock, 2014).

Furthermore, urban gardens serve as places where food citizenship is reinforced particularly through the process of reclaiming urban public space for instance (Smith, 2020). Through practices like participatory decision-making, community involvement and ecological care, participants are more motivated to take responsibility for their food system and urban environment (McClintock, 2014). This is particularly, important at a time where neoliberalism and the rise of privatisation have noticeably contributed to the loss of public space, as many scholars and activists have addressed already (Barron, 2017).

From the point of view of the French Marxist intellectual Henri Lefebvre, urban gardens can be a practical and materialized form of his notion of the “right to the city”. According to Lefebvre, in order to resist capitalism, it is necessary to understand and reimagine the city. The ‘modern city’ or also the capitalist city, wants to reduce everything, even the production of space, to a financial exchange, to a commodity. As a result, public space is formed according to capitalist ideals which support individualistic structures that prevent people from gathering, playing, and interacting with each other. Lefebvre, thus, view his idea of “right to the city” as a struggle to de-alienate the urban space and as a way to invite citizens to reclaim the city and transform it based on their own needs (Purcell, 2014). Urban community gardens, therefore, can be viewed as an act of reclaiming the lived space (Barron, 2017).

The multi-functionality of urban agriculture, being the regeneration of the environment, the transformation of public space, or the reconnection of the consumers with their food and nature has been recognised by many scholars (Larsson & Nygren, 2023; Bell et al., 2016). Comprehending its possibility for expansion can be very useful in the movement of local food systems (McClintock, 2010). As McClintock (2010) notes, urban food production has gained popularity in periods of crisis. Examples like the ones in US and Britain showed that this happened before and now, during today’s crisis, it has returned. People no longer view it mainly as a hobby but as a way that contributes to sustainability and economic resilience.

As far as Greece is concerned, urban agriculture has been a topic that was introduced in the latest years of its modern history. Within the last two decades and due to immense landscape transformations, particularly in the city of Athens, as well as the economic crisis, and migration, the concept of urban agriculture was introduced to Greek society (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018). The impact of the socio-economic crisis as well the rise of social and environmental justice

movements due to society's mobilisation, gave space for the creation of urban Municipal vegetable gardens and guerilla community gardens (Apostolopoulou, 2020; Anthopoulou et al., 2017; Nikolaidou, 2021).

These initiatives were specifically prominent in the city of Athens, to combat the consequences of rapid urbanization, austerity measures, financial crisis, and environmental degradation. New foodways were conceived from the beginning of the crisis onwards that resulted in a different foodscape for the urban dwellers of Athens (Morales-Bernardos, 2019). The exploration of new urban food initiatives is especially meaningful for the context of Greece, where the rise of neoliberal development has contributed to the process privatisation of public spaces, which continues until today (Dalakoglou, 2012; Apostolopoulou, 2020, Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2015). Additionally, the lack of institutional frameworks that protect the existence of initiatives like urban gardens poses a threat to these spaces, which cultivate connections with the human and non-human world, through food practices and working with the land (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018; Nikolaidou, 2021).

This thesis project explores the role of urban vegetable gardens in food sourcing and how they relate to other food provisioning practices in the city of Athens. In the next sections, I will present the experiences of urban gardeners in these spaces, the meanings they attribute to their lived stories in the garden, and whether and in what ways these experiences have influenced their relationship with food. Additionally, I will illustrate participants' personal foodscapes through mapping to examine their motivations behind their food sourcing choices and whether their involvement in the garden has influenced these decisions. Ultimately, I will look into how these choices and practices shape the overall relationship between participants and food.

## 1.1. Problem statement

Urban gardening as a practice can be traced back to the beginning of the cities. Gardens emerged in towns and cities in the earliest times and served as spaces to grow food, keep livestock as well as a social space accessible to people with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Dickie, 1968). In recent years these gardens can be found in the form of urban allotment gardens or community gardens and the initial reason for their development is connected to crises that arose in European and American cities after the industrialization during the mid and late nineteenth century (Keshavarz & Bell, 2016). The food insecurity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's transition to urban industrialism fueled the appearance of urban gardening (Barthel et al., 2013). However, urban gardening in Europe emerged at different moments and unfolded within various rates and paths (Keshavarz & Bell, 2016).

The concept of allotment gardens was first identified in England during the land enclosure movement (Keshavarz & Bell, 2016). With the privatization of common land, many poor peasants lost access to food and fuel for their livestock and to compensate for that small parcels of land were allocated to them. This practice introduced the term allotment in the English

language and was the foundation for what is known today as allotment gardens (Harrison, 2009). This concept was spread to other countries with existent gardening culture and was reshaped according to their specific social, economic and cultural circumstances as explained by Keshavarz and Bell (2016).

For instance, countries like the Netherlands, due to their early industrialization and urbanization processes, have developed a strong culture of urban gardening, with well-established and accessible community gardens. As stated by Keshavarz & Bell (2016), some of the initial motives of these gardening initiatives were to increase food production as well as combat depression and alcoholism. In recent years, participation in Dutch community gardens is driven by other motivations. In Veen et al. (2015) research study it was found that gardeners get involved in these initiatives for their social aspects like building connections and social cohesion in the neighbourhood. This is also connected with issues such as the lack of unity in Western societies such as in the Netherlands (Blokland, 2003).

Adding to that, the rise of consumerism and modern ways of living after the 1950s, especially in Western countries, resulted in an increasing alienation from nature (Keshavarz & Bell, 2016). This distancing fueled the emergence of the environmental movement with urban gardens playing an important role as spaces to practice sustainability, regreen the city and access fresh, organic and local food that is free from pesticides (Keshavarz & Bell, 2016). In recent decades, urban gardening whether in allotments or community gardens share a variety of environmental, social, economic purposes (Turner, 2011). As mentioned earlier, urban gardens serve a multifunctional role which provides a number of benefits as studied and presented in existing literature (Egerer et al., 2024).

Turner (2011) interestingly described that, “community gardens facilitate the connection between food, place-making as well as a sense of belonging”. According to them, gardeners experience their lived realities through their bodies and via engaging with their practices in the gardens. The daily efforts and time they put into their vegetable plots build a stronger connection and identity to place, in the garden they are part of. However, the process of commodification of food has affected the relationship among people and food systems and resulted in a disconnection from food production and consumption (Turner, 2011).

In the case of Greece, the accelerated urbanization rates, especially in the city of Athens, transformed the urban landscape by replacing small private gardens and green spaces with apartment buildings resulting in a disconnection between urbanites and the process of growing food (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018). Allotment and community gardening has been a more recent practice in Greece (Keshavarz & Bell, 2016), with municipal gardens being the most prominent form (Anthopoulou, 2015). Anthopoulou et al. (2017), argue that urban gardens in Greece are a new concept for the urban lifestyle and seems to be a result of the financial crisis and the food insecurity that followed.

Some of these gardening initiatives that I also visited during my fieldwork were linked to municipal efforts to provide socioeconomically vulnerable or disabled groups of people with a place where they could practice growing food while also finding relief from stress induced by the

crisis (Ioannou et al., 2016; Partalidou & Anthopoulos, 2017). Other gardens that will be presented later, however, served as cases of community and guerilla gardening and were connected to grassroots and social movements with an aim for environmental, spatial, and social justice, as stated by Apostolopoulou & Kotsila (2022).

McClintock (2010), argues that the birth of urban gardens attempts to address social issues tackle ecological disruptions, reclaim public spaces, give food cultural meaning and reconnect people with what they eat and their environment. The recent emergence of urban gardening spaces in Greece has opened the discussion on what is their role in the society and current food systems. This thesis is an attempt to understand how urban gardens contribute to the food provisioning methods of urban dwellers and identify the meaning people give to the experiences they have with food and practices related to it.

Much of the existing available literature, however, on Greek urban vegetable gardens is closely framed around the socioeconomic crisis and austerity measures, with many of the studies conducted already a decade ago. While these contributions have offered important insights, they lack linkages with the current realities of the gardens and urban food practices in Athens. Furthermore, the concept of foodscapes has not been explored yet in the context of Greek urban gardening and food provisioning that could identify tangible as well as intangible connections among people, food, and the urban space.

Furthermore, the limited involvement of diverse actors in the planning and policy-making of urban gardening initiatives, combined with the absence of institutional frameworks in Greece, poses a significant threat to the longevity of these gardens (Anthopoulos et al., 2017). For this reason, it is important to investigate the role of such spaces in the current urban foodways of Athens and to explore their potential in reshaping relations around food and paths of reconnecting the urban with the rural.

By focusing on the personal lived experiences, stories, emotions, and meanings of those who engage in city gardening, this study seeks to strengthen the argument for the importance of these spaces and to emphasize their connection to the “right to the city”. Ultimately, ensuring the preservation of these gardens is necessary to sustain active spaces of food, community, and urban resilience, and with this research I aspire to contribute to a wider understanding of their social, cultural, and political significance.

## 1.2. Contextual information & Literature Review

The rural landscape and cultural identity of Greece have been highly shaped by agriculture as one of the major export sectors. Historical events have had a profound impact on Greece’s agricultural landscape, land distribution, and urbanisation patterns. After the War of Independence (1821), the government redistributed previously Ottoman owned lands, also known as ‘national lands’, in such a way that led to an agricultural system that was based on small-scale farms rather than large ones (Clogg, 1986). Greece did not develop a system of large

private lands but instead remained a country characterized by peasant farmers and small-scale landowners up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Alogoskoufis, 2021).

At that time Greece experienced a transformation with the continuous rise in the density of the population (Alogoskoufis, 2021). The two big migratory waves, including the arrival of the Asia Minor refugees and the rural depopulation that followed World War II, left rural areas with a decreased labour force as people moved to the big cities of Greece to have a better life (Kandyliis, 2006). This population growth stimulated a shift from agriculture to industry as well as a transition from rural to urban (Alogoskoufis, 2021). Moreover, the rising number of people inflating the city of Athens, as well as the expansion of the middle class strata, created the need for cheap and modern housing (Maloutas & Spyrellis, 2015; Phokaides & Touloumi, 2024).

During the 1950's a significant number of one or two-floor houses with gardens were razed to build apartment buildings with five or more stories. Before that, several neighbourhoods in central Athens primarily consisted of ground-floor modest houses accompanied by orchards and vegetable gardens that provided access to fresh food (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018). The construction of *polykatoikia*, an inexpensive, privately developed, low cost, residential building though accelerated Athens' growth (Phokaides & Touloumi, 2024) at the same time it distanced city dwellers from the practice of growing one's food.

The urban-rural ties, nevertheless, were not really broken because of both practical and symbolic connections between the citizens and the agricultural life (Koutsou et al., 2011). Rural family properties were retained by many of the internal migrants possibly also due to the strong role of family in Greek society (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018; Koutsou et al., 2011).

For many Greek urban dwellers, their ancestral villages or family lands hold an important way of maintaining connection with the countryside and food production too. It has been common for Greeks to either cultivate/rent family-owned land or receive fresh produce like olives, figs, oranges, lemons, from relatives who still live in rural areas. Many urban citizens, therefore, have maintained their roots to the Greek countryside and nature in general (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018; Anthopoulou et al., 2017). However, this might not be the case for the new generations as the links to the rural started shifting, declining or even disappearing in some cases (Partalidou & Anthopoulou, 2017).

Greece entering the Eurozone was one of the main reasons behind its financial instability, which together with the long-term decline in country's revenues, high external debt, and the international financial crisis of 2008-2009, led to the country's debt crisis (Alogoskoufis & Featherstone, 2021). In 2010 the country signed the first of three adjustment programmes designed and supervised by the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank, which required strict austerity measures, including reductions in wages and pensions, significant tax increases, and cuts to public spending. that lasted until 2018 (Christodoulakis, 2019).

The deepening of the economic crisis and the impact of the austerity measures imposed after the 2009-2010 debt crisis, further weakened the agricultural sector increasing issues such as poverty and food insecurity, particularly in the dense urban areas such as Athens (Haniotou &

Dalipi, 2018; Partalidou & Anthopoulou, 2017). Furthermore, the continuous city degradation characterized by cuts to social protection and the decline of the waged labour, coupled with the rise of social injustice gave birth to activist groups in many Greek cities and especially in the capital (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018; Morales-Bernados, 2019). Through self-organizing and creating collective spaces urban citizens had the desire to “take their lives back into their hands” to combat the effects of this multifaceted crisis on basic human needs like food, water, housing and education (Morales-Bernados, 2019).

As Arampatzi (2017) states, the years of austerity and crisis in Athens gave rise to social movements as well as ‘urban solidarity spaces’. The crucial year of 2008, with the assassination of a 15-year-old teenager by the Greek police set the ground for extensive mobilisations all over the country as well as for one of the biggest demonstrations in its modern history (Stavrides, 2010).

The rapid urbanisation and the way the city of Athens was developed led to the creation of a high-density city center with minimal green spaces, which triggered reactions from many concerned citizens. Having the aim of reclaiming public space, groups of activists began planting trees and plants in underdeveloped or abandoned areas of the city with the purpose of greening and reusing these spaces. Moreover, through the formation of open spaces, citizens got the opportunity to practice their citizenship by gathering, negotiating for their needs, and working towards improved social welfare (Alexandri, 2014; Morales-Bernados, 2019).

Several of these “urban mobilisations” (Morales-Bernados, 2019) aimed not only to provide free meals but also to raise awareness about food issues (Arampatzi, 2017). Food banks, urban gardens, social kitchens, food cooperatives, and social groceries were some of the initiatives that helped with the provision of food and distribution of cooked food across various neighbourhoods of Athens (Morales-Bernados, 2019). Through these social movements, some fundamental examples of community gardens in the history of Greek urban agriculture were brought to life, such as Navarino park in Exarcheia, the Votanikos Social Centre, and Agros farm in Hellinikon, located at the area of the former Athens airport (Ioannou et al., 2016). The latter two, however, were eventually demolished.

The example of Agros farm in Hellinikon represents one of the largest community gardens in Athens and was first established in 2011 by a group of conscious activists and volunteers to promote communal land management, environmental education and urban food sovereignty while reclaiming the public space (Anthopoulou, 2015). As Apostolopoulou & Kotsila (2022), interestingly describe in their article, the Hellinikon garden symbolised a grassroots movement for reclaiming the urban space as commons, challenging privatisation and imagining radical new ways of creating and using public urban space.

Around the same time the Greek government with the support of NSRF (National Strategic Reference Framework) funds, launched a programme that included soup kitchen services, social groceries, and food, clothing, and household device banks to combat the negative effects of a prolonged economic crisis. In mid-2012, the programme expanded to include the creation of urban vegetable gardens. The programme *Municipal vegetable gardens* (‘*astikoi lachanokipoi*’)

in Greek cities aimed to support low-income families and individuals, ensure access to fresh organic vegetables for those in need, and promote urban greening (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018; Anthopoulou et al., 2017). Moreover, these “anti-poverty structures”, were funded by the European Union and sought to promote self-sufficiency as well as ease the socioeconomic and psychological burdens of the crisis (Nikolaidou, 2021).

The first municipal gardens appeared during 2011-2012 in various cities of Greece, such as Alexandroupolis, Thessaloniki, Larissa and several areas of Athens. Priority and access to these gardens are determined based on municipalities’ socio-economic criteria, which include vulnerable social groups such as pensioners, low-income households, people with disabilities, unemployed citizens, single-parent families etc.

As Anthopoulou et al., (2017) describe, gardeners were given free access to land, water and some basic amenities like irrigation equipment, fencing and soil enhancement provided by the municipality. Additionally, in some gardens, at least during the first year of operation, gardeners were also offered guidance from an agronomist to support them in organic vegetable production. Lastly, municipalities attempted to link the gardens with other social projects, such as social groceries, by providing 10-15% of the vegetable production to help combat food insecurity at the local level (Anthopoulou et al., 2017).

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the practice of urban agriculture in community or municipal gardens is a relatively recent phenomenon, shaped by historical and political factors (Partalidou & Anthopoulou, 2017). Rapid urban development, as discussed above, and the construction of large apartment buildings led to the erasure of private vegetable gardens in the city. Strong ties between urban and rural areas, as well as the need for spaces to reconnect with nature, culture, and food, and to address the crisis and emerging inequalities, fostered the creation of diverse pathways for practicing urban gardening.

In Greece, urban gardens emerged either from municipalities as a reaction to growing urban poverty in the form of vegetable gardens, or through grassroots groups as a response to the depletion of green areas in the cities in form of community gardens (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018). When I refer to municipal vegetable gardens, I mean the provisioning of individual plots aimed at meeting families’ food needs, whereas community gardens are bottom-up initiatives managed by local community members that focus on collective learning, social engagement, and the repurposing of public spaces (Morán & Fernández de Casadevante, 2014; Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2022).

Although research on vegetable gardens in Athens is still relatively limited, some studies have explored the role of urban gardens in city life. For instance, Haniotou & Dalipi (2018), provide an overview of the emergence of urban agriculture and community gardening in Greece, especially as a response to the mid-2000s economic crisis and its impacts on Greek society. Another important contribution is a case study of a municipal vegetable garden in Northern Greece by Partalidou & Anthopoulou (2017), which identifies the motives of urban dwellers for engaging in gardening, as well as the “meanings and emotions” associated with the garden, the practice of growing food, and the community building among its members.

On a similar note, Anthopoulou (2016) and Anthopoulou and Nikolaidou (2015) explored the case of the municipal vegetable garden of Maroussi in Athens, an area that has undergone profound urban restructuring since the 1990s. The garden was established in 2012 on an abandoned 1,500 m<sup>2</sup> plot land owned by the municipality as a means to address the issue of neo-poverty. According to their research, prior to the creation of the vegetable garden, there had been a plan to build a multi-purpose municipal centre in the late 1990s, which failed due to mobilisation by local residents. The garden was divided into 40 allotments of 25 m<sup>2</sup>, followed strictly organic farming practices, and provided access to gardeners according to socio-economic criteria as discussed earlier. It is important to mention, however, that the garden in Maroussi, as well as others in various areas of Athens and Greece, was considered a short-term project with limited institutional support (Anthopoulou & Nikolaidou, 2015).

Furthermore, as described earlier, the emblematic case of the Agros community garden in Hellinikon has recently been studied by Apostolopoulou and Kotsila (2022) as an example of guerilla gardening and resistance to urban privatisation, in response to the private development of the former International Airport of Athens. The community garden in Hellinikon symbolised urban citizens' disobedience toward the crisis-driven takeover of city land, including public green areas, as well as their demand for active participation in urban space-making.

Up until now, municipal vegetable gardens in Greece have served as a short-term solution to the ongoing socio-economic crisis and are mainly characterised by small plots available to economically vulnerable groups. Additionally, these gardens were initially created with financial support from EU resources, and with municipalities financially restrained to this day, this dependence may not be sustainable in the long run (Haniotou & Dalipi, 2018).

Despite institutional obstacles, the lack of a community gardening tradition, and the need for new tools and procedures, some municipal gardens in Athens remain active in providing food for their members. As urban agriculture is increasingly becoming a point of interest for Greek municipalities (Georgi & Vissilia, 2014), it is important to explore how citizens try to reconnect with local food systems through current vegetable gardens and other available food provisioning options. Even urban citizens who may not have direct connections to rural areas are turning to food provisioning options such as open air markets (*laiki agora*) or grassroots initiatives to access fresh produce (Nikolaidou, 2020).

Focusing on the area of Athens, the rise of social movements and activist collectives, together with the effects of a devastating socio-economic crisis, resulted significant changes to the city's food provisioning landscape. Simultaneously, there was a growing awareness of the harmful consequences of contemporary food production and consumption, characterised by issues such as land contestation, farmland loss, ecological damage, and food insecurity (Nikolaidou, 2020).

The food geography of Athens has been shaped by self-help strategies such as social groceries, consumer collectives as alternatives to chain grocery stores and supermarkets, urban gardens, food banks and alternative food networks such as Community Supported Agriculture, door-to-door organic boxes, and No-Middlemen markets (*Agores Horis Mesazontes*). All of these activities, which have been branded as part of the "Social and solidarity economy", as suggested

by Dalakoglou et al. (2018), aim to create socially just and democratic food provisioning systems based on local and regional agriculture (Nikolaidou 2020; Calvário et al., 2016). This shift is particularly beneficial to urban dwellers, as it provides access to local and organic fresh food (Nikolaidou 2020; Partalidou 2015; Nikolaidou et al., 2017).

Alternative grassroots food initiatives, such as the No-Middlemen markets, emerged in response to the financial crisis and as a way to challenge the existing food production, distribution, and consumption system (Papacharalampous ,2021; Nikolaidou, 2020). More specifically, these markets provide producers with the opportunity to sell their products directly to consumers (Papacharalampous, 2021), and prices are determined through horizontal structures based on social criteria to ensure fair wages for farmers (Calvário et al., 2016).

The No-Middlemen food provisioning network, also known as the “potato movement”, first appeared in 2012, in Katerini, a small town in Northern Greece, initiated by the volunteer group “My Land” (*O topos mou*). Potatoes were distributed at low prices as a way to show solidarity with farmers and to resist the crisis and the rising food prices. The movement later spread throughout Greece, expanding the diversity of products sold to include flour, honey, olive oil, legumes, rice, and more (Nikolaidou, 2020; Petrou, 2015). As Petrou (2015) argues, the value of this alternative food distribution network lay not only in providing urban dwellers with access to high-quality, affordable, local products but also in enabling citizen engagement in movements that foster solidarity and support small-scale farmers and independent producers.

State regulations and institutional limitations, however, were obstacles to the smooth continuation of the No-Middlemen markets in Greece. Most markets were organized by grassroots collectives, activists, and neighbourhood initiatives, and rarely by local authorities, who only unofficially allowed them to operate. Due to the absence of a clear “regulatory framework” to protect their function, many markets were unauthorized and, as a result, they were under the threat of reduction or closure (Nikolaidou, 2020). In 2022, the No-Middlemen markets were abolished by then Minister of Development Adonis Georgiadis (2022, May), who argued that they operated outside the institutional framework of farmers’ markets and required a more regulated system to ensure equal rules for all participants. Recently, however, this policy seems to be shifting, as the Minister of Citizen Protection, Takis Theodorikakos, announced plans to institutionalize markets without intermediaries, which would be organized and managed by municipalities, a measure expected to begin in 2025 (2025, May). Its aim of this measure is to strengthen the connection between farmers and consumers, reduce the role of intermediaries, and ensure low food prices.

Regardless of the rural-urban connections and the available alternative food networks, most food provisioning in Athens occurs through middlemen, as Papacharalampous (2021) argues. Urban dwellers in Athens, source their food either from supermarkets or from the traditional open-air markets, called ‘*laiki agora*’. *Laiki agora*, literally translated “peoples’ market” in Greek, is a type of street market first established in Athens in 1929 (Petrou, 2015). Today, 44 open-air markets operate weekly across various neighbourhoods in the city center, offering fresh produce, legumes, grains, eggs, honey, olives, fish, nuts, flowers, household items, and clothing.

Although some farmers sell their products directly in these markets, most produce comes from middlemen (Papacharalampous, 2021).

These traditional street markets offer a wide variety of affordable food options, often cheaper than those found in supermarkets and are preferred by people from diverse social and economic backgrounds (Petrou, 2015). Most importantly, open-air markets are vibrant places that bring together different groups of people, connect producers with consumers, and create opportunities for socio-political conversations and expressions (Petrou, 2015).

In today's foodscape, Athenian inhabitants continue to shape foodways and reconnect with local food systems through self-organized markets, urban vegetable gardens, and other solidarity-based food provisioning networks. Throughout this section, I have attempted to briefly present the historical and political moments in Greece's recent history that have influenced the development and transformation of urban gardening as well as the broader foodscapes of the city. Examining the reasons that have shaped the way people engage with food sourcing and other food practices can contribute to a holistic understanding of the role of urban gardens in the current Greek food system. Bringing the focus to the personal narratives and experiences of gardeners can also offer insights into gardening culture, connections with the past, and relationships between the urban and the rural, and how all these elements ultimately shape today's foodscape in Greece.

### 1.3. Research Questions

Existing literature on urban gardening in Greece, and more specifically in Athens, has explored aspects of social cohesion, environmental and mental health impacts, and alternative food networks. As mentioned earlier, urbanisation, together with the rapid development that the city of Athens experienced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, altered the urban landscape and created a significant distance between urbanites and food production.

The intensification of the economic and social crisis, however, brought to life activist groups who sought to combat social injustice and increasing issues such as poverty and food insecurity through self-organization. Community gardens, and later the emergence of municipal vegetable gardens led by local institutions, served as structures that supported Greek citizens in coping with the detrimental effects of multilayered instability.

A study by Partalidou and Anthopoulou (2016) on the allotment garden in Thermi, in Northern Greece, identified various motivations for participation as well as mental health benefits experienced by gardeners. However, limited research has been dedicated to urban gardens in Athens, particularly from the perspective of their relation to other fresh food provisioning methods and the ways gardeners experience gardening, give meaning to their participation and how this shapes their relationship with food and related practices.

My research questions attempt to bridge this gap in literature and provide recent insights into

the gardens by exploring the practical and experiential dimensions of urban gardens for Athenian dwellers. My primary research question is:

***What is the role of urban gardens in Athens in provisioning fresh food, and how do they relate to other food provisioning methods?***

Additionally, I will address the following sub-questions:

- 1. What motivates urban dwellers in Athens to choose urban gardens and other food sources?***
- 2. How do these choices shape their overall relationship with food?***

## 1.4. Conceptual lens

To answer the proposed research questions, I will use foodscapes as a framework and as a tool to map gardeners' food practices and food sources. The concept of foodscapes will enable me to study both the tangible and intangible aspects of food environments and experiences of urban gardeners. Using mapping as a research technique will allow me to identify patterns of accessibility, affordability, as well as symbolic reasons related to food sourcing, in order to understand how these methods collectively shape urban citizens' relationship with food.

Based on a spatial politics approach, I will follow Lefebvre's notion of the "right to the city" to look into how urban dwellers in Athens engage with urban space and the ways they reshape it according to their needs around food and food provisioning.

Lastly, my research is also interested in the meanings people assign to their food and food practices and the experiences associated with them, specifically in the context of an urban vegetable garden. Understanding the meaning participants attribute to urban vegetable gardens as an explanation for why they choose this type of food provisioning is a central focus of my research. I will also gather and present gardeners' experiences to gain a richer perspective on the connections with food, gardening as a practice, and gardening as a method of food provisioning.

### 1.4.1. Foodscapes

Foodscapes have been used as a term since 1995 (Yasmeen, 1995) and, as defined by Adema (2009), refer to the intersection of food and landscape, including both the physical spaces where food is produced, distributed, and consumed as well as the conceptual and cultural ideas around these places. As McKendrick (2014) explains, the concept of foodscapes was developed in geography and has been also used in disciplines such as urban studies and public health in relation to urban food environments. Sociologists have further expanded the framework by adding institutional and cultural dimensions, as well as discourses that influence the relationship

we have with food. (McKendrick, 2014).

The idea of “scape” has been used by several researchers to describe elements or phenomena based on their arrangement in space across various contexts (Brembeck & Johansson, 2010). As Appadurai (1996) describes it, “‘scapes’ are fluid, irregular shapes of landscapes” (Appadurai, 1996). Utilizing the concept of a “scape” to understand complex systems where humans, specimens, and environments interact is especially useful in the context of food and food provisioning. Interconnectedness is a central characteristic of this concept that helps explain these interactions (Mikkelsen, 2011).

Within food studies, foodscapes have been used to understand and give meaning to how people engage with food, meals, and food sources in a specific environment. Foodscapes address all practices related to food, including where food is sourced, what is eaten, who cooks it, and whether it is shared with others, based on spatial, cultural, social, and economic factors (Greenleaf & Robinson, 2020). For these reasons, as McKendrick (2014) argues, foodscapes reflect race, gender, and class biases.

In many rural and urban places, food options are neither diverse nor accessible, and citizens may need to travel long distances in order to find healthy and culturally appropriate food. Institutions and corporate organizations play an important role in governing what food we eat, who has access to it, and who does not (McKendrick, 2014; Winson, 2003). Food politics also shape modern foodscapes, based on the idea that our food choices can shift the industrial food system toward an ethical, healthy, and sustainable one. An ethical foodscape, as Morgan (2010) suggests, encompasses values connected to social and environmental justice and sustainability. Building on this perspective, several authors have contributed to expanding foodscapes as a conceptual framework that challenges dominant food production and consumption patterns while encouraging the creation of new ones grounded in political, social, and cultural action (Mikkelsen, 2011).

The notion of foodscapes is not limited to the physical and tangible elements of the environments where food can be found, but also to the intangible connections between food and place. This complex concept also encompasses ideas and meanings of food, as well as the relationships people have with food across different contexts (Adema, 2007). Additionally, a foodscape is not passive or definitive, but constantly changing and actualized at different scales; from personal spaces to social spaces such as kitchens or communities, and to public spaces of cities or nations (Adema, 2007; Brembeck & Johansson, 2010). In other words, foodscapes can range from the macro scale of industrial agriculture to urban agriculture with edible landscapes in the form of parks, gardens, or private balconies (Favargiotti et al., 2021).

Johnson et al. (2009), go further highlighting the cultural dimension of the concept, describing foodscapes as “a social construction that captures and constitutes cultural ideals of how food relates to specific places, people, and food systems” (Johnston et al., 2009). Building on this idea, another approach to foodscapes is the concept of the “destination foodscape” developed by Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019).

As cited by Bernardo et al. (2021), this concept highlights how food experiences are shaped

by several dimensions, including the social, physical, qualitative, economic, unique, and experiential aspects of a foodscape. Although this framework has been primarily applied in tourism studies, these dimensions offer a useful conceptual lens for understanding urban foodscapes. In my thesis, I consider these dimensions not from the perspective of tourism, but as a way of interpreting how gardeners and urban dwellers interact with food and foodscapes in Athens.

Mapping foodscapes will be a key tool in identifying patterns in these interactions. Factors such as affordability and accessibility, as well as the meanings people assign to the specific food sourcing methods, can reveal how urban dwellers structure their food practices and the relationship they have with food. As cited by Earl (2017), if maps are tools of discourse (Foucault, 1981), they are also stories of time, place, and people. Thus, mapping helps me understand and visualize the food experiences of the gardeners, the meanings they attribute to food, and the role the garden plays within those experiences.

The notion of foodscapes fits my thesis as a way to understand both the practical and the more abstract aspects of the food provisioning methods that urban gardeners choose and engage with. Using this approach allows me to examine the daily practices of participants in relation to food, including the role that urban vegetable gardens can play. By incorporating, in my framework, the holistic perspective that foodscapes offer, I can study how people, food, garden, and other food sources are interconnected and how these interactions unfold. Social interactions and symbolic meanings, which are central to foodscapes studies (Bernardo et al., 2021), play a key role in my analysis and in the interpretation of my findings.

#### 1.4.2. Lefebvre's notion of "the right to the city"

Critical geography studies have offered theoretical frameworks for connecting political theory with place-based practices such as gardening in the city. One of these is spatial justice theory, which is part of the broader theories of social justice. Social justice, as stated by Özmen (2014), is regarded as a central principle for personal behaviour and communal life within democratic and egalitarian societies.

Different forms of injustice can be found within the context of the city. This is particularly important as life in the city has been shaped by privatisation and commodification processes deriving from globalisation and neoliberalisation. Grassroots urban uprisings in the late 1960s and 1970s influenced scholars researching injustice in urban spatial processes (Certomà et al., 2019). Certomà et al. argue that urban planning can reveal dynamics of power, domination, resistance, and alternatives to the ways our society is currently structured, while also negotiating needs in relation to space.

Several forms of urban gardens were developed after the creation of allotments, showing forms of resistance that emerged during the rise of social and environmental justice movements

along with urban counter-culture. The maintenance of a garden requires communal ownership and labour and offers opportunities for social connections among gardeners, fostering the creation of a special “urban social space” (Hou, 2017; Certomà et al., 2019). Community gardens, as mentioned earlier in my thesis, symbolise the act of reclaiming urban public space which aligns with Lefebvre’s idea of the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968).

The idea of the “right to the city” was introduced by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in 1968 in his book *Le droit à la ville*. For Lefebvre, rights are the byproduct of political struggle arising from collective demands and mobilizations by citizens. Lefebvre argues that this struggle is connected to citizens’ act of demanding their rights such as the right to information, to difference, to self-management, and the “right to the city”. This last right, also the focus of my thesis, is essentially Lefebvre’s way of interpreting spatial politics with urban space as its central concern (Purcell, 2014).

Lefebvre viewed the city as heavily shaped by industrial capitalism, which was also one of the reasons that drove the intense acceleration of urbanisation. The commodification of space and the emphasis on exchange of value are central characteristics of the capitalist city. Moreover, the privatisation of space has, according to Lefebvre’s views, resulted in an alienated urban environment that distances citizens and prevents them from interacting and playing with one another. The notion of the “right to the city” represents a way to resist alienation and reintegrate urban space into the network of social life and connections (Purcell, 2014).

By stating that the city belongs to its residents, Lefebvre opens the possibility of redirecting the city from being a machine of production and accumulation to a space in which cooperative social relations among its inhabitants can flourish (Lefebvre, 2003). His idea further proposes that resisting the capitalist paradigm requires reimagining the city as a place where urban dwellers through collective participation shape the urban space according to their needs and desires (Purcell, 2014).

Based on Lefebvre’s ideas, urban space should be a domain where dwellers can meet one another, play, learn, and collectively decide what the city should look and how it should function. Connecting this back to themes introduced earlier in my thesis, the multimodal nature of urban gardens is particularly relevant to explore through the lens of the “right to the city”. As discussed, gardens serve as more than places of food production, they also foster social connections, host diverse activities, create opportunities for cultural experiences, and support collective decision-making practices which reinforce citizenship and active participation (Certomà et al., 2019).

Recently, there has been an increased interest among scholars, activists, and policy makers in using the “right to the city” as a framework to bring awareness on injustices and inequalities present in urban environments (Olsson & Besussi, 2023). Furthermore, the intersection between social justice and urban gardening has been explored by several academics, as mentioned in Certomà et al.’s (2019) work. Although urban gardens risk producing barriers and contributing to gentrification (Rosol, 2012) and may sometimes perpetuate neoliberal practices, they nevertheless hold significant potential to transform public life (Schmelzkopf, 1995; Certomà et

al., 2019).

Olsson & Besussi (2023), argue that a radical understanding of urban citizenship is part of Lefebvre's call for the "right to the city". As mentioned earlier, gardens have been recognised as spaces that encourage active participation and foster the practice of citizenship through collective planning and organizing activities that shape space according to participants' needs and interests. Participation in urban gardens, therefore, gives urban dwellers the opportunity to transform public spaces and shape them according to their food-related needs and desires. Urban gardening can also be seen as a form of resistance to institutional food policies and the current structure of food systems (Smith, 2020).

Urban gardens thus offer spaces for citizens to practice the rights to participation and appropriation (Cifuentes & Sonnino, 2024), expressed in creative ways, that Lefebvre viewed as essential for the metamorphosis of the city (Olsson & Besussi, 2023). In my thesis, I focus on how urban gardeners in Athens, structure their city in relation to their food and food sourcing needs through their involvement in urban gardens. I consider it important to explore the role of urban gardens under the lens of the "right to city", in Athens, where urban gardening initiatives increased during a period marked by prolonged austerity coupled with emerging neoliberal practices after the 2008 crisis (Kaika et al., 2022).

Greek citizens' mobilisation to reclaim public space and demand social, environmental, and spatial equality embodies the type of struggle that Lefebvre considers essential for revolution. For him, revolutionary imagination is necessary to envision a world where value is used rather than exchanged, where connection and interaction are prioritized over consumption and separation, and where play is valued over work (Purcell, 2014). In my thesis, I will explore how everyday acts of resistance and creation within urban gardening contribute to the formation of the possible urban world Lefebvre envisioned.

### 1.4.3. Meanings and experiences around food practices

Existing research has explored the theme of place-making in community spaces (Eizenberg, 2012; Barron, 2017; Pitt, 2019). These spaces can be defined, as suggested by Eizenberg (2012), as autonomous, socially produced spaces that involve increased citizen participation, and a sense of psychological ownership, highlighting the diverse needs and cultures of the communities. Building on this, Frieland suggests that a "place is the fusion of space and experience, a space filled with meanings, a source of identity" (1992, p. 14). Several authors have suggested that urban gardening initiatives serve as tools of place-making (Fox-Kämper, 2019; Noori & Benson, 2016).

One way to interpret the process of place-making in urban gardens is by understanding the meanings, imaginings, and lived experiences that gardeners formulate. These elements are personal and as diverse as the people who develop them. Experiences and the process of meaning-making are influenced by different settings and cannot be studied in isolation (Noori &

Benson, 2016). In relational approaches, experience is understood as the embodied engagement not only with the external material world but also among human and more-than-human entities within holistic contexts (Wagenaar & Cook, 2011; Murdoch, 2006).

Urban gardens offer opportunities for social and physical interactions among the gardeners, the physical elements of the garden, and non-human aspects, allowing experiences to unfold and different meanings to be developed (Noori & Benson, 2016). In my thesis, I focus on the lived experiences gardeners have in the gardens and the meanings they assign to food practices such as food growing, provisioning, and consumption. Based on this, I attempt to draw connections between these experiences and meanings and gardeners' overall relationship with food.

Lyson (2004) explains that alienation between farmers and consumers has emerged as a result of the spatial disconnection between food production and consumption. Furthermore, the agro-industrial food sector and supermarkets have commodified the food experience. As Tornaghi (2016) argues, the lack of meaningful experiences with food among urbanites has led to a loss of skills related to food practices. Urban agricultural projects aim to reconnect the rural with the urban (Heynen et al., 2012) and play a role in expanding the meaning food carries for urban gardeners (Jordi-Sánchez & Díaz-Aguilar, 2021).

I find it important to explore urban gardens as “lived spaces” (Lefebvre, 1991) where experiences and meanings are created. Understanding what food means to people in the context of urban gardening can help identify its role within the broader landscape of food provisioning in the city. Moreover, as Tornaghi (2016) mentions, re-skilling and equipping people with knowledge of self-grown food production through urban initiatives, when experienced as a lived practice, can support food justice and counteract capitalist ideologies that harm and exploit communities.

Focusing on lived experiences and the meanings people give to food practices also contributes to arguments about the right to produce and control one's own food . Food is associated with various spheres of meaning and is influenced by the material, cultural, and emotional landscapes within it is embedded. Self-determination through growing one's own food can be part of the broader food justice discussion and can contribute critical reflections on urban development, land rights, and natural resource management, factors that may restrict urbanites' ability to produce their own food (Tornaghi, 2016).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Data collection & Analysis

To explore my research questions, I followed a methodology that combines qualitative and ethnographic methods. This section describes the rationale behind the methods selected for my data collection as well as the analysis.

According to Babbie and Creswell, research methodology could be defined as “the steps taken by researchers for the collection and analysis of data” (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). Other scholars, such as Saunders (2012), suggest that methodology refers to “the theory of how research should be undertaken, and incorporates theoretical, philosophical assumptions which underly the research and the impact these have in the choice of method(s)”. Building on this, it is important to highlight that methodology is not just a set of tools as it also reflects the underlying assumptions and positionalities held by the researcher. As Davidavičienė (2018) explains, “the way we approach, and design research is shaped by how we understand reality, knowledge, and human nature”. In relation with this perspective, my research approach was shaped by my belief that knowledge is co-produced through the process of dialogue and interaction. As a researcher, I viewed the experiences, emotions, and stories of the participants not simply as data, but as meaningful narratives that express broader socio-cultural contexts and realities.

Research methods, as Babbie (2004) proposes, are the “observational techniques” used to obtain and analyse data, such as questionnaires, interviews, observation, experiments, and evaluation research. My personal approach and views influenced the choices of my qualitative methods that I present later, including interviews, participant observation, and the collection of field notes and photographs. These techniques supported me in illustrating both the physical and emotional dimensions of my fieldwork in Athens.

It is also important to clarify what a research design is. Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018) explain that “research design is an outline of the research process, illustrating how the study will move from the research questions to the results”. For this thesis, I followed a qualitative research approach from the point of view of ethnography and narrative inquiry for data collection, and grounded theory for data analysis. Ethnography is an anthropological research method, and as described by Davidavičienė (2018), “it is the art and science of describing a group or culture”. Spradley (2016) similarly notes that “rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people”. The ethnographic methods I used in my fieldwork were semi-structured interviews and participant observation, which helped me gain insights into gardeners’ personal stories and experiences.

Semi-structured interviews include open-ended questions and do not require a pre-set order of topics of discussion. The aim is to cover most themes on the agenda while allowing room for clarifications, elaborations, illustrations, or justifications (Karatsareas, 2022). This flexibility was the reason I chose this interview structure as it gave participants time and space to express themselves, views, and their ideas in their own way.

During the interviews, many of which felt like casual conversations, questions that were not planned or thought of before, often emerged, in response to the interesting points and stories shared by interviewees. Conducting a walking interview provided additional insights and enabled direct co-production of knowledge (Holton & Riley, 2014), since it allows participants to show the space they engage with daily rather than simply describing it (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Day & Cornell, 2023). I chose to walk along with the interviewees and let them guide me through the garden and their plot so I could better understand embodied practices and interactions within

these environments. This technique also allowed the physical space to act as an ‘active and present participant’ into the conversation, introducing unpredictable encounters and topics of discussion (Hall, 2009; Emmel & Clark, 2011).

Walking interviews bridge the ethnographic methods of interviews and participant observation (Brown & Durrheim, 2009). Participant observation is an essential ethnographic tool in which “the researcher participates in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning both the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and culture”, according to Gravlee and Bernard (2014). Bernard (2011, 343) argues that participant observation is an approach to research. By locating myself in the urban gardens, interacting with gardeners, and observing their daily activities, such as gardening, chatting, exchanging tips, or sharing food, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in their social and food practices.

Narrative research also played a central role in shaping my research approach, data collection, and analysis. Benhabib (1990: 187-8), drawing on Hannah Arendt’s work, describes narrative as “a fundamental human activity. Arendt’s (1998) argue that “stories (or narratives) are living realities” and that it is “through action and speech that we insert ourselves in the world”. I chose to incorporate stories from the gardeners because, as Ettore (2017) argues, narrative supports the coexistence of multiple truths and the inherently subjective and ever-shifting processes of meaning-making. As I mentioned earlier, it is very important for me to understand the meaning behind participants’ stories and to link these meanings to their experiences in the garden and with food. During my analysis, I paid attention not only to what gardeners said, but to how their narratives were structured and presented, as well as to non-verbal cues such as tone, imagery, and language.

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience as defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). A narrative or a story is more than a sequence of events; it represents the narrator’s attempt to weave events together in terms of both time and meaning (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Thus, in studying experience, it is crucial to consider the relational contact between participants and researchers, as well as the place and specific context (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The stories presented in the Findings section include gardeners’ experiences in the garden and other foodscapes, such as markets and supermarkets. Stories about food practices, such as cooking, sharing, shopping, are also presented and related to gardening experiences and life beyond the gardens. In this way, I can inquire how participants make sense of their lived realities around food.

Alongside semi-structured interviews, I also conducted narrative interviews. This method allowed me to collect gardeners’ stories about their lived experiences. Narrative interviews place participants at the center of the study, giving them the opportunity to navigate the conversation and its content (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). During these conversations, active listening is essential for building trust from the beginning (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Listening to and retelling participants’ stories carries relational and ethical responsibilities (Noddings, 1984; Clandinin, & Huber, 2006).). As scholars emphasize, storytelling occurs within a shared space of

trust, care, and responsiveness where the researcher must remain attentive to issues of representation, ownership, and “the ethics of everyday life” (Charon & Montello, 2002). I therefore considered it essential to be attentive and to maintain an open and accepting atmosphere that would encourage interviewees to express themselves freely.

Digital photography was also used as a method of data collection and documentation. I took photographs during my garden visits to document the gardeners’ plots and the crops growing during that season. These images later helped me recall details and enriched the content of my findings. Additionally, photographs allowed me to identify patterns, differences, and material or symbolic details that might have been overlooked in real time. I also used visual images to provoke conversations and reflection, as they tend to be more accessible than most academic discourses (Weber, 2008). Images can elicit emotions (Weber, 2008), and for this reason I wanted my visit to the demolished garden of Agioi Anargyroi to have a strong impact on readers. Photographs also served as an archival record, preserving visual aspects of the fieldwork site.

Finally, I used mapping as a tool to visually present the personal foodscapes of the gardeners I interviewed. During the interviews, I asked questions such as where they bought their food, whether the sources were close to their homes, and whether they combined visits to the garden with other food provisioning places. This information allowed me to create personal foodscape maps, combining writing with visual representation to illustrate gardeners’ lived experiences in relation to food.

Having outlined the methodological tools and research approaches that guided my fieldwork, I now turn to describe how these methods were applied in practice. In the following sections, I present the process of identifying the garden locations, gaining access to them, establishing connections with participants, and documenting the sites and practices over the course of two months. These passages provide readers with a clearer understanding of how I collected my data and how the methodology was implemented on the ground.

My fieldwork in Athens took place over two months, between the end of January 2025 and the end of March 2025. During this period, I visited six vegetable gardens, five of which were municipal gardens. All gardens were located within the greater Athens region but outside the city center. I typically travelled to the gardens by public transport from central Athens. The gardens I visited included the municipal vegetable garden of Agios Dimitrios, the municipal vegetable garden of Petroupoli, two municipal vegetable gardens in Maroussi, the self-organized vegetable garden of Vrillissia run by the association *Agrosholoi*, and the municipal vegetable garden in Agioi Anargyroi, which was demolished, by the municipality one day before my scheduled visit. This decision will be further discussed in the Findings section.

Research into active gardens began prior to my arrival in Athens. To identify current urban gardens, I conducted online searches, explored open-source platforms and local websites, and reviewed relevant literature. I also attempted to find gardeners’ contact information to schedule meetings, continuing the process during the early days of my stay in Athens. Communication with participants was mostly by phone, with a few contacts made through email. As LeCompte & Schensul (2013) point out, developing relationships is crucial in ethnographic research to gain

rapport and trust. This is also necessary for gaining access to the physical fieldwork site.

In my case, most gardens were open to the public, but establishing a connection with an official contact or gardener beforehand was helpful. For instance, before visiting the Community Organic Vegetable Garden of Petroupoli, I contacted the project coordinator. She works for the non-profit “Organization Earth” (*Organosi Gi*), which, with support from the Municipality of Petroupoli and the John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation, created the garden. She invited me to a bee workshop, where I could meet gardeners and obtain contact information for future interviews.

A similar process was needed for the vegetable gardens in Maroussi. The municipal green department suggested that I meet with the vice-mayor of Maroussi to explain the purpose of my research and what I planned to do with the gardeners. During our meeting, he phoned several active gardeners from the garden at Ktima Karella to ask whether they would like to participate in my research. He then provided me with their phone numbers, which I used to arrange appointments.

Finding contacts in the gardens was not always possible to do in advance. For example, during my first visit to the second garden in Maroussi, located on Dodekannisou Street, I found the garden locked and no gardeners were present. I tried to gather information regarding garden’s opening hours by passers-by and local residents but eventually decided to visit again. On my second attempt I met three gardeners and interviewed two of them. They also gave me the phone number of another garden member. This process is known as snowball sampling, which involves asking participants to recommend others in order to expand the research sample (Hair et al., 2020). Snowball sampling proved extremely helpful, as in many cases it was challenging to find gardeners willing to participate.

As I mentioned at the beginning, all my data were qualitative and collected within the gardens. Interviews usually took place early in the day to fit participants’ schedule. Conducting interviews in the garden was very important as it allowed interviewees to feel comfortable and in control. Walking during the interview encouraged gardeners to share stories and experiences through a show and tell approach. I aimed to invite a creative exchange of information through movement, external elements, and visuals.

I chose not to record interviews. This decision sought to ensure the conversations felt natural and casual, reducing the pressure a recording device might create. The information and stories shared by gardeners, as well as my personal impressions, became a part of my extensive and detailed field notes. Field notes were written down within a few hours of each interview to ensure that details and impressions were not lost or hard to recall. As I previously mentioned, photographs and foodscape maps were also part of the data collection. Together, the field notes, photographs, and maps constitute what Spradley (1980) refers to as the ethnographic record. This record connects observations to analysis (Spradley, 1980).

In ethnographic research, “the data analysis step involves a sense-making approach”, as Bhattacharjee (2012) states. My research aligns with this perspective as I did not follow a positivist paradigm that separates context and social settings from reality (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

Instead, I acknowledged the importance of context, social relations, and lived experiences as inseparable from reality. During the qualitative analysis of my findings, I tried to “make sense” of my field notes and photographs with an open and creative mindset, not to predict or explain in a deterministic way, but rather identify meanings and connections. Guided by my research questions and theoretical framework, I analysed interviews and observations to uncover relationships and themes. Identifying emergent concepts and their patterns was the first step and foundation of my analysis.

The qualitative analysis technique I used was coding, based on the Glasser and Strauss’ (1967) Grounded Theory. Grounded theory as a technique interprets data to generate a theory. I began with open coding, categorizing text data into codes (concepts) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To do this, I used the Miro platform to displace my data into memos, representing codes and creating a digital mind map. I then grouped the codes into broader categories, as the theory suggests. Next, I conducted axial coding, through which categories are grouped to explain the phenomenon of my research (Bhattacharjee, 2012). I continued by naming the key categories and determining whether they represent conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

Throughout the analysis, I often revisited and redefined categories and interpretations as new insights emerged. For example, codes that initially seemed separate, such as “joy in gardening” and “stress relief through gardening”, later merged within a broader theme of “therapeutic aspects of the garden”. Additionally, participants’ stories and reflections revealed complex and unexpected themes, such as gendered foodscapes, which I had not anticipated but which became an important dimension of my analysis. The steps of grounded theory analysis were intertwined as new understandings developed through data interpretation. By remaining open to new insights while keeping my research questions in focus, I refined and conceptualised the themes that appear in the Findings section of this thesis.

## 2.2. Ethical issues & Limitations

My thesis research involved observational visits to six urban vegetable gardens around Athens and open semi-structured interviews with the gardeners. Presenting my research findings first requires considering the ethical responsibilities involved, as well as acknowledging and discussing their limitations.

During the interviews, I provided participants with all the necessary information and explanations about the purpose of my research, what it was about, why I was conducting it, and how the data would be used. I received oral consent from all participants to take part in the study and to use the information they shared regarding their personal experiences and stories in the garden. The stories and quotes included in my findings are attributed to the gardeners using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. All photographs used in the thesis were taken by me and presented alongside the text to support the findings. All information shared in this thesis is first

and foremost treated with care and respect for the participants and their position within the study.

Due to the nature of ethnographic research, the relationship between researcher and participant lies at the center of the study (Kendall & Thangaraj, 2013), which made it essential to build trust with the gardeners. The aim of my research design was to create a relaxed atmosphere during interviews and garden visits and to have casual conversations. It is important to mention, however, that the two-month duration of my fieldwork limited the amount of time I was able to spend with each participant and to observe each garden. This also influenced my ethnographic approach, as I was not a familiar face to participants but rather a student seeking interviews for her thesis.

Furthermore, my research findings reflect the stories and perspectives of the group of participants I was able to interview. The composition of this group was not highly diverse, which influenced the content of my findings. In general, the urban gardens I visited consisted mostly of male gardeners, as well as retirees belonging to the lower or middle classes of the socioeconomic spectrum. Nevertheless, I attempted to maintain gender balance among those participated in the study, and in total I interviewed eleven women and thirteen men. During the day, I would usually find male members working in the gardens, since it is more common for women to be occupied with household tasks or cooking.

Another challenge during my fieldwork was the timing of my visits, which took place at the end of the Greek winter. Some weeks, the low temperatures or rain kept gardeners from visiting the gardens. This led to cancelations of scheduled interview appointments and delayed the process of snowball sampling. Moreover, because the season was about to change, some gardeners were waiting for warmer days to begin planting their spring and summer crops. As a result, they had fewer gardening activities to show or discuss with me.

It is important to note that my positionality as a researcher played a role in the findings and was a reason for both connection and distance with participants. Although I share a cultural and linguistic background with interviewees, I am not from Athens, I currently live abroad, and I have no personal involvement in any of the gardens I studied. While sharing the same ethnicity and language facilitated trust, my age, gender, and academic position likely influenced how gardeners perceived me and what information chose to share.

For example, during some interviews with female gardeners, male gardeners would intervene and take over the conversation, often showcasing problematic power dynamics. On the contrary, the women were generally more open and willing to share personal stories and reflections, perhaps because they related to me as a young woman interested in their practices, or even because I reminded them of their own children. On the other hand, a few men interacted with me in ways that appeared more entitled. One male gardener even called me the following day to reassure me that his opinions were “not too negative and miserable” and to express hope that society’s situation would improve. This interaction made me reflect on my position as a researcher and how it might have influenced what gardeners felt was appropriate to share. To add to that, in some cases, it was not entirely clear whether participants understood the reason of the interviews, which may have also influenced their responses.

These moments made me aware that my positionality shaped which stories were told, the depth of details shared, and even the tone used. Lastly, I acknowledge that my personal interest in urban edible gardens, alternative food systems, and foodscapes strongly influenced the questions I asked, and the ways in which I collected and analysed the data.

## 3. Findings

### Part I: Motivations behind urban dwellers choosing urban gardens in Athens

During my conversations with gardeners from the urban gardens of Athens, I quickly realised that gardening was more than just a recreational practice or a way to obtain fresh produce. Participants described gardening as a mindful practice that calms their minds and bodies, and a form of escape from the hectic and bustling urban environment of Athens. For many interviewees, the gardens were also important social gathering spaces where relationships and connections developed. In this part, I explore the main motivations that guided urbanites to join these gardens, focusing on their therapeutic role as well as their social dimensions.

#### *The therapeutic role of urban gardens*

Almost every gardener I interviewed told me that gardening is a form of psychotherapy for them, a practice that helps them release stress and even serves as a form of exercise. One of them shared: *“I do it to support my mental health”* and has been involved for more than 10 years in the municipal garden of Maroussi. For some interviewees, working in the garden is a bodily experience, as it involves physical tasks like bending, kneeling, digging, or carrying things. A female gardener commented, *“I like gardening because I can release my stress and at the same time work out”*.

One of the youngest gardeners I spoke with shared, *“When I’m at work, I think about going to the garden afterwards –it lifts my mood and gives me something to look forward to”*, highlighting the deeper emotional importance of the garden.

In my findings, urban gardens were also described as a getaway for gardeners facing personal struggles or family issues. *“I started working in the garden as an escape since I had to stop going to work due to family reasons, and coming here brings me so much joy and relief. I get satisfied watching my plants grow from seeds”*, one of the female gardeners of the municipal garden in Agios Dimitrios told me when I asked about her interest and motivation for joining the garden.

For some of the gardeners the location of their garden plot was somewhat far from the urban landscape. For instance, the municipal garden in Maroussi who is situated on a hill and surrounded by an open green area where people walk their dogs or go running. *“Coming here improves my mood and gives me a sense of peace, since the surroundings are full of green”*, one of the garden’s members told me while sitting in her car, moments before we leave the garden,

admiring the nature around us.

For others, participation in the urban garden was an “*escape from the chaos of the big city*”, as one of the gardeners from the self-organised urban garden in Vrillissia, noted. The name of this association is a Greek pun, *Agrosholoi*, based on the Greek word *argosholos* which means “idle”. The pun swaps *argo-* with *agro-* (meaning “field” or “land”) and, together with the Greek word ‘*ascholoumai*’ (“to engage in”) makes a playful combination of words suggesting people who might seem idle but are actually busy working in the garden. He joined this garden to continue working the land and staying close to nature, as he had previously maintained a plot outside Athens, near the sea. He reflected, “*When I moved to this area, 4 years ago, this garden was a great opportunity for me to continue doing what I had started.*”.

Coming to the garden feels like a ritual for several participants, especially during the summer months when maintenance needs are higher, as one gardener from Petroupoli’s vegetable garden explained. She and her husband, retired professors, obtained a plot when the garden opened and have been visiting and working there consistently and very often. She elaborated, “*During the summer months I came to the garden with my husband at 18:00 and we stayed until 22:00 at night. We like to spend time in the garden*”. Another participant from the same garden shared that coming to the garden for weeding, and other tasks has become a daily practice during which time seems to pass without her noticing. She mentioned, “*I come to the garden around 10:30 in the morning, and the bus back home leaves at 12:15, and most of the times I miss it. I lose track of time- two hours pass without me realising*”. This emphasizes the distressing and relaxing benefits of gardening that many participants highlighted during our conversations.

### *The socialising role of urban gardens*

Many of the gardeners I met were male retirees over the age of sixty. A common motivation for them to be part of an urban garden was the opportunity to socialize and interact with other members. “*A typical day at the garden for me before doing laborious tasks, includes making Greek coffee in our communal kitchen and chatting with the other gardeners*”, one of them told me. All the gardens I visited had some kind of communal area where gardeners could sit, drink their coffee, or even cook and share a meal together. These spaces ranged from proper structures built by the municipality to DIY shacks, usually made by male members of the gardens. Katerina, one of the members of this garden, explained, “*These two shacks made from wood and metal sheets were built by the regulars of the garden. They used furniture and objects found in the trash. They used to meet here every day to talk and drink coffee together. Later on, they would also have lunch consisting of meze and tsipouro or wine. On Tuesdays, it is the people’s market day, so they would buy fish and barbeque in the garden. Sometimes I joined their gatherings*”.

Katerina was one of the most active gardeners of the municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi, which had been demolished by the mayor two days before our meeting. She showed me around the field and the gathering spots, spaces filled with personal objects and clothes,

where time seems to have stopped. Inside one of the shacks there was a table, chairs, and an outdoor grill, confirming what Katerina had described. Gardening tools, plastic water bottles, and decorative pieces were also present. The latter, Katerina noted were, in her own words, “*a way for them to make their communal space cozier and add a personal touch to it*”. Everything seemed untouched; however, the field had been trespassed by the municipality’s bulldozer, leaving behind broken broccoli and tire tracks.



**Figure 1.** Personal items of gardeners in municipal vegetable garden in Agioi Anargyroi, Athens, February 2025.

Practices of preparing food together and sharing food among gardeners were recurring themes in my research. In Petroupoli’s municipal garden, one gardener shared: “*Sometimes I visit the garden with my friends and spend time talking and drinking coffee while our children play and run around. With the other gardeners we celebrate our name days here, or other national holidays. One time, we cooked soup using vegetables from our gardens*”. Celebrating life events and national holidays around food was a preeminent way of socialising in the urban gardens of Athens.

For many male retirees I interviewed, participating in these gardens was one of their main opportunities for socialising. “*I come to this garden to meet friends and other gardeners and exchange some words. This place helps with socialising*”, as one member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> municipal garden of Maroussi told me on the day I visited spontaneously. Several gardeners from that garden, and from the one in Agios Dimitrios, explained that urban gardens replace traditional cafes (*kafeneia*), where retired and older men typically meet to socialise, by playing card games and eating together. “*For me the garden is a place to socialise and meet people. It is also an*

*escape from the kafeneio which is the place to be when you are a grandpa*”, Kiriakos from Agios Dimitrios’ garden told me. Gardening and maintaining a vegetable plot seemed like a healthier way for them to spend their abundant free time, allowing them to connect with nature and with others, whereas going to the local cafes is considered a more passive activity involving unhealthy habits such as smoking and drinking.

Overall, gardeners’ motivations behind their participation in the gardens were found to lay on two interlinked dimensions, which was the gardens’ therapeutic role and their social role. As I explained, gardening was a source of joy, relaxation, and a sense of escape from the chaos of the city. At the same time, they served as a gathering space for participants to socialise and share special moments together. Together, these roles show how urban gardening functions as a meaningful practice in a stressful everyday city life that contributes to the creation of spaces of community and belonging.

## Part II: The role of urban gardens in fresh food provisioning and everyday food practices

### Food provisioning role of urban gardens

One of the main research questions guiding this study was to identify the role of urban gardens in Athens in providing access to fresh food, and how gardens relate to other food-sourcing methods. In the following part, I present how participants value the produce they receive from the garden, how it shapes their dietary habits, and the role they play in their weekly food needs. I also explore additional food provisioning practices such as foraging, seed and food exchange, which place gardens into wider ecosystems of mutual aid and care.

Based on the interviews, the municipal vegetable gardens I visited primarily give gardeners access to organic and seasonal food. As many of the gardeners told me, one of the reasons they maintain their plots is the opportunity to source naturally grown food that is free from pesticides. Some responses that confirm the above statements were:

*“I am gardening here to have access to organic food”*,

*“I want to know what I am eating, to know where my food is coming from”*, and, lastly, a young parent shared:

*“I started growing my own food so that my daughter eats healthy and organic food”*.

Additionally, a few gardeners expressed appreciation for seasonal food, connecting it to the natural rhythms of nature and to higher food quality.

Having access to organic, flavourful, and fresh food provides the gardeners I met with a sense of partial autonomy in their food provision. During a phone call with Rita, a gardener from the municipal vegetable garden of Maroussi, she reflected on her long experience with growing her own food and stated: *“I wish I was self-sufficient. Less pesticides, better quality, and*

*incomparable taste*". However, she also shared that due to her current health condition, she is no longer able to visit the garden as often. Combined with ongoing issues with water access and minimal municipal support, taking care of her plot has become a significant challenge. As a result, she recently installed raised beds on her balcony, where she plans to grow tomatoes and cucumbers to continue producing some fresh food independently.

The interviewed gardeners expressed great satisfaction with the taste of their self-grown food. It was very clear that, for them, the fresh produce they acquire from the municipal vegetable gardens is far superior to what is found in supermarkets or even at open-air markets. As one of them emphasised: *"The taste of homegrown vegetables cannot be compared with the ones from the store"*. Taste and flavour were among the most significant characteristics shared about garden's fresh food.

A gardener from the self-organised garden in Vrilissia told me: *"The food from the garden is sacred and the taste is far different than the one you buy from the store"*, highlighting once again the incomparable quality of self-grown vegetables. The quality of the vegetables produced in the urban gardens of Athens held a distinct place in my conversations with gardeners, one that revealed how taste is intertwined with place, pleasure, and the cultural value of food itself.

Furthermore, my discussions with gardeners revealed that the garden and its available vegetables influenced the way they approached food, food sources, and even grocery planning. It is important to note that for most, if not all, of the urban gardeners I interviewed, the garden played a complementary role in other means of obtaining food. According to them, the garden typically provides about 30 to 50% of their weekly dietary needs. This varies depending on the household, the number of family members, personal food preferences, and the time and effort invested in maintaining the plot. As one gardener from the municipal garden of Agios Dimitrios pointed out: *"The fresh produce I get from the garden covers only 30% of my weekly dietary needs"*. The remainder of their food needs were covered by weekly visits to open-air markets or supermarkets, as I will explain later in my findings.

Even though garden's provisioning role in terms of quantity was limited, the access it gave to natural, clean, and seasonal food provided by the gardens was highly valued by participants and was considered incomparable to food bought from the store. In the words of one gardener from the municipal vegetable garden of Petroupoli: *"Together with my family and my young daughter, I have the opportunity to eat 'clean' food. We stopped buying fresh produce from the supermarket because it doesn't have any taste. After growing our first tomatoes, we quickly found out the ones from the store were tasteless. We also avoid buying tomatoes out of season."*

Among other participants, the role of the vegetable garden in their daily lives was reflected in their dietary habits. Gardeners explained that they started eating greens and vegetables more often, which led to significant changes in their diets. Better taste was found to contribute to this shift. One gardener noted: *"I have been eating more greens and vegetables since I started growing them myself. Before that, I didn't like them as much and ate meat more often"*. Moreover, their engagement in gardening connected them with plants they had never seen or tried before, enriching their diets and cooking practices with new ingredients.

Through my research on the urban gardens of Athens, I found that their role in food provisioning also manifested in non-conventional ways. More specifically, in almost every garden I visited, members had created informal systems of gift exchange and mutual aid. This involved sharing not only vegetables and greens but also seeds, knowledge, tips and recipes. Katerina, from the now demolished municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi, described this practice: *“There was a lot of mutual aid in the garden. We used to exchange tips, seeds, and plants. I didn’t know a lot about gardening, but I learned from other experienced gardeners”*.

These alternative economies of food and knowledge exchange help build ecosystems of care that nurture both human and more-than-human relationships. Mutual aid and reciprocity were especially prominent in several gardens. Anthi explained how members often help one another by watering the plots of those who cannot visit. On the day of our interview, she harvested broccoli from the plot of another gardener whom she planned to meet later to give the vegetables and check on, as this person had been ill for several weeks.

These gift economies extend beyond the gardens themselves into the neighbourhood, family networks, workplaces, and beyond. Most participants I met mentioned that it is very common for them to share their fresh produce with family, friends, neighbours, or even passers-by. As one gardener said: *“Since we cannot consume all the harvest by ourselves, I usually give it away to other people. It is something that brings me a lot of joy. Once there was an old lady passing by the garden and I gave her a lettuce, like I would if it was my mother”*.

Another participant from the same garden said: *“I share the food I’m growing with my friends and family. I get very happy when I give food to other people. Sometimes I give a salad to passers-by from the neighbourhood”*. Many gardeners also share food with co-workers, like Dimitra from the municipal vegetable garden of Maroussi, who said: *“I share the food I grow with family, friends, and colleagues. I bring homemade pitas at work that contain spinach and wild greens from my garden”*. In this way, ecosystems of care were formed which extended into various spaces, with the garden playing a central role as an alternative source of food for the Athenian gardeners.

### *Everyday food practices and urban gardens’ challenges*

Alongside knowledge exchange and gift economies, the practice of foraging emerged as a distinct method of food provisioning connected to the gardens. During the period of my visit, wild greens were abundant not only in the gardeners’ plots but also throughout the surrounding areas. Edible plants such as sorrel, sow thistle, wild arugula, Mediterranean hartwort, wild chicory, cardoon, and nettles were regularly foraged and consumed during the spring months.

At the self-organised garden of *Agrosholoi*, one of the members, Stelios, was foraging his daily edible wild greens during my visit. He was collecting wild arugula and cardoon (or wild artichoke), the latter being a very traditional and typical ingredient in Cyprus, where he originally comes from. For many gardeners, meals were often planned around the types of wild greens gathered during a garden visit.

In the municipal garden of Agios Dimitrios, I found Kiriakos working in his plot. He has been gardening there for approximately eight to ten years. After a brief conversation about his experience in the garden, he showed me the wild greens he had foraged earlier, saying: *“Today I collected these wild greens, and I will make them into a salad. Sometimes I cook an omelette with them”*. Gardeners expressed pride and joy for their homecooked meals with fresh produce from the garden. Kiriakos expressed his passion for cooking, telling me: *“Cooking is my weak spot. I love doing it, especially when I use ingredients from the garden”*.

Satisfaction was also another shared feeling among gardeners regarding the wild spring greens and the produce grown in their plots. It is necessary to mention that neither gardening nor foraging was motivated by survival or financial necessity for any of the gardeners I spoke to. According to Christos, member of the municipal garden in Petroupoli: *“You don’t save money by maintaining a vegetable plot. It comes with many expenses such as buying seeds or organic fertilizers, but most importantly you invest a lot of time growing these plants. And as we all know, time equals money”*. Other interviewees similarly stressed that they did not rely on gardens out of economic need. For most, gardening and/or foraging were valued as ways of accessing organic, and flavourful food, as well as leisure activities that support both their mental and physical well-being.

Despite the high value gardeners give to fresh and organic food, various structural and practical limitations such as natural factors, space, and time influenced what they can grow. For instance, Anthi, from the municipal garden of Petroupoli, struggled with the cultivation of certain plants due to the limited sunlight her plot received. As she explained: *“As you can see, my plot is under this pine tree, and this means that my plants don’t get a lot of sun. It’s difficult for me to grow plants like tomatoes that need constant sunlight”*.

In the municipal garden of Maroussi, several members complained about problematic water distribution, especially during the hot summer months. They shared with me that they have repeatedly faced situations where they had no access to sufficient water because some of the older members monopolised it, leaving little or none for others. This created obstacles in growing summer crops. As one gardener expressed, *“The upcoming summer I am considering not planting any summer vegetables because I am afraid, they will not survive due to the current unfair water distribution”*. It was February at the time of the interview, which she noted is usually when she prepares for tomato cultivation.

Other limitations related to soil health, personal constraints, or available time were important factors shaping the participation in the garden. The limited food autonomy gardens provided, was often impacted by environmental and infrastructural challenges. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned systems of mutual aid, sharing, and caring taking place in the gardens eased the constraints.

To sum up, urban gardens’ provisioning role, though complementary, has a meaningful role as a food sourcing practice for the participants. While they do not cover all food needs, they give access to organic, tasty, and seasonal food that many gardeners consider “sacred” and superior to

store bought food. The structural limitations noticed in some of these gardens, such as limited sunlight and unequal water distribution, as well as other factors mentioned, influence what gardeners grow in their plots. These obstacles, however, seem to be overcome through acts of mutual aid, foraging, and gift economies that create a network of care across neighbourhoods, workplaces, and family environments. Finally, the gardens provide both material and symbolic ways of nourishing gardeners and have an impact on eating habits and the overall relationship with food and place.

### Part III: The right to a different city and the memories of the village

Referring to my Introduction, urban gardens have been linked with practices of reclaiming space and challenging traditional ideas on how a city should look like (Baudry, 2012). During this part of my findings, I share how Athenian dwellers relate to the gardens beyond food provisioning, exploring themes of resistance, community, and memory. I look into how participants claim their right to shape urban environments, modern food systems, and the ways gardening reconnects them with life in the village.

One of the quotes of an interview that encapsulate the tensions between gardeners and local authorities as well as the will to persist and maintain the gardens was the following,

“Although the last years, maintaining my vegetable plot has become tiring for me, I stayed in the garden because I wanted to stand against the mayor and his threats to demolish it”.

Inspired by these words, I wanted to begin this part by referring more extensively to the resistance practiced by members of the municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi against the continuous threats and obstacles imposed by the municipality from 2019 until the early days of February 2025. According to the information I collected from the interview with one of the garden’s members, the vegetable garden initiative was part of a programme funded by the EU, as explained already in more detail in my Introduction. The funding lasted for two years, from 2013 to 2015, and covered not only the construction of the garden and all necessary materials (seeds, compost,



**Figure 2.** Municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi in Athens, 2014. Photo received by one of the gardeners of the garden.



**Figure 3.** Demolished municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi, Athens, February 2025.

etc.) but also the provision of an agronomist for crop consultancy and a psychologist to offer mental support to people affected by the economic crisis. After 2015, the mayor in office at that time allowed gardeners to continue using the space and the vegetable garden while maintaining access to water. Around 2019, the formation of a new governing body in the municipality was followed by discussions about implementing new policies regarding the

vegetable garden. As the interviewee shared, the municipality governing that time had plans to build a profit-driven technological center and replace the municipal garden. In the first years, the members of the garden were all united against the mayor's threats to demolish the garden. As Katerina explained to me, several people from the garden actively participated in meetings with local authorities and raised their voices to make clear that they wanted to keep using the garden.

Later on, the gardeners began to feel exhausted by the situation and the continuous threats from the mayor raised feelings of fear and insecurity among them. Finally, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February of this year, a bulldozer entered and demolished the municipal garden of Agioi Anargyroi, despite some gardeners' requests to wait a few days so they could harvest their last spring onions and cabbages, as Katerina told me. I visited the garden two days later, and the destruction of the landscape deeply saddened Katerina, who was confronted with the view of the trespassed plants.

Gardeners' actions also expressed forms of resistance not only against local authorities' decisions, but also towards wider urban structures and prevailing food systems that control urban space's usage and restrain ecological practices and alternative food provisioning methods. Through reclaiming and cultivating abandoned urban space, organizing collectively, practicing the right to shape the city based on food desires, many gardeners negotiated notions regarding how the city should be used and who has control over it.

While the municipal garden of Agioi Anrgyroi was a clear example of how gardeners directly confronted local authorities, other urban gardens in Athens followed different paths of collective action. One of those gardens I visited in Vrilissia. The self-organised vegetable garden initiated by *Agrosholoi* in the municipality of Vrilissia, is located on an artificial hill that was formerly a

naval military base. The 52 hectares of land now belong to the municipality and have been transformed into a large park (Anthopoulou, 2015). In 2012, the association requested a portion of this land from the municipality to establish a community garden for urban food production, as well as to engage in hiking and climbing activities. The municipal council accepted their request and granted them 3 hectares of land.

The association of *Agrosholoi* is involved not only in urban gardening but also in a range of nature-related activities. They regularly organise outdoor events for children from the neighbourhood, such as climbing on their DIY wall and practicing archery. Additionally, they collaborate with local schools, inviting students to the garden to learn about urban gardening and self-organised food production. The group has also mapped hiking routes in the surrounding area, designed for educational walks that end at the community garden. Other activities that take place in their garden include live music nights, cultural events, and jam-making festivals where participants prepare homemade jams using fruits harvested from their garden.

As Stefanos, one of the longest involved gardeners in the group, shared with me, they have gained trust from the municipality through their active participation and contribution to the local community. This allows them to maintain their garden and continue organising activities. He also mentioned that part of the food produced in the community garden is donated to the social grocery store initiative (“*Koinoniko pantopoleio*”) run by the municipality of Vrilissia.

According to him and other gardener-members of the association, the goal of the garden initiative is not necessarily to achieve self-sufficiency in food production but rather to reconnect with the land while embracing values of solidarity and collective action, which they believe are increasingly absent in modern urban societies.

The maintenance of the community garden in Vrilissia and the navigation of matters related to communal ownership have come with many challenges, since urban agriculture and cooperation are not deeply rooted in the local culture, as Stefanos argued. Nevertheless, after years of operation, they have succeeded in practicing a form of communing that works for their group while also maintaining a common fund for gardening expenses. From my interviews, it appears that through the activities they organise around nature and food, they aspire to motivate and inspire the local community to become more engaged with issues related to food production as well as the use of urban public space.

Beyond self-organised initiatives, the notion of the right to shape the urban environment also emerged in the context of municipal gardens. In the municipal garden of Petroupoli, some members spoke about the symbolic role of the garden within the neighbourhood. During one of my scheduled visits to the garden, I met and interviewed Panos, a 70-year-old gardener, who explained that although he does not depend on his plot for his survival, he strongly supports the existence of the garden. For him, its importance goes further from just a space for food production. In his own words, “*The garden is a revolutionary space that plays a fundamental role in society. It is very important that it offers open public gathering spaces as well as opportunities for students to visit the garden and learn more about how plants look and grow*”.

As he explained to me, access to the garden is primarily available to its members, however, it

remains open to visitors from the neighbourhood, such as passers-by, school groups, and friends or family members of gardeners. In this way, garden functions as a semi-private space, which is not fully private but not entirely public either. It does remain accessible enough to give the opportunity for unplanned interactions, educational gatherings, and social occasions to take place, that commercially or restricted private spaces do not offer.

This in between status of the garden is what makes Panos characterize it as a “revolutionary space”. By transforming a previously neglected urban space, gardeners shape their city according to collective needs, food, learning, and socialising. Panos contributed also to the construction of much of the garden’s infrastructure highlighting the active role of gardeners in creating alternative commons in the city.

As we spoke, he proudly admired the work invested in creating the garden, commenting: *“The garden has become a beautiful space in the neighbourhood”*. He told me how he brought ancient strawberry seeds which, with the help of other gardeners, were planted in a flowerbed, now are enjoyed by gardeners, visitors and students alike. He also showed me a big banana tree he had planted from a cutting gifted by one of his neighbours. According to Panos, the tree produced many bananas that were later harvested with the participation of students from local schools.

What is now a vibrant vegetable garden was previously an overlooked dog park, in this neighbourhood of Petroupoli, as Vasso, one of its members, remarked. This transformation has brought various benefits to the neighbourhood. As Vasso further explained: *“I was often afraid to pass by this area alone before the creation of the garden. Having access to this garden in a big city is a great opportunity. The garden serves many roles and provides us with many benefits. It’s also like a small community”*.

Another participant from the same garden, shared with me during a brief conversation while tending his plot: *“Our actions here in the garden challenge the status quo, and often the rest of the gardeners are not even aware of it”*. His comment highlighted an important point I observed in my fieldwork, that not all gardeners I interviewed consciously perceive their participation in the gardens as a radical or political act aimed at reshaping certain structures in the city. In fact, some explicitly stated that they do not wish to be involved in politics.

Furthermore, practices of resisting the current urban design and attempting to grow food despite spatial restrictions were expanded to private and semi-private spaces. As I will explain, several gardeners I met, shared that they also maintain small gardens on the terraces of Greek apartment blocks (*polykatoikies*), or that they have friends who practice urban food production in similar ways. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to meet these urban gardeners or visit any of these rooftop gardens. However, during my interviews, I noticed that many gardeners expressed the idea of creating a smaller version of their municipal garden plots in their homes or in shared spaces within their apartment block (*polykatoikia*).

Many Greek *polykatoikies* have a communal space on the ground floor, usually near the entrance, where some trees or flowers are planted. Vasso told me: *“If this garden closes down or I need to give my plot to a new gardener, I will make a vegetable plot on the ground floor of the*

*polykatoikia where I live*”, emphasizing gardeners’ desire to claim their right to grow food in the city, even in limited spaces. For Dimitra, another gardener, a similar idea did not receive support. As she explained, the other residents in her apartment building did not want to turn their shared space into a garden. Nevertheless, she mentioned being grateful to have access to her plot in the municipal garden.

Gardener Nikos, from the municipal garden of Maroussi, described to me the changes he observed in his neighbourhood and how much urbanisation altered the landscape. In his words: *“I have lived in this area for fifty years now and I have seen all the changes it has gone through. Back then this area was full of open fields, but now we are surrounded by polykatoikies. I remember they were growing potatoes here”*. Another participant from the same garden Rita, told me during her interview: *“All terraces should turn into rooftop vegetable gardens”*, reflecting on the dense and often chaotic urban environment of Athens.

Other participants, like Dimitra, shared similar sentiments. She noted that she has observed more and more people taking up gardening or creating small gardens in their apartments and shared public spaces. She said: *“I now see more Facebook groups popping up where members share their garden initiatives, give tips, or exchange plants and seeds. I feel optimistic that this will continue in the city and more people will grow their own food”*. These conversations showed how citizens of Athens practiced their right to a different city, transforming their living environments into landscapes that foster community building and local food production. Yet these were not the only reasons shaping gardeners’ participation. As I discovered throughout the interviews, participants’ desire to participate in the gardens, related to also what could be described as the “right to the village”, as motivation behind gardening activated emotional connections to rural life, and ancestral past.

Engaging with municipal gardens, building rooftop gardens, or simply growing vegetables on balconies were ways of bringing their villages into the city. Several gardeners I interviewed had strong ties to their ancestral villages, some still had parents living there who maintained vegetable gardens, while others had grown up there and acquired gardening experience. Christos told me, *“I grew up in the village, that’s why I know a bit about growing vegetables”*. A longing for connection with the rural past was also expressed by Theodora, who said: *“Although I grew up in the city, I always loved being in nature and growing my own food. My dad was a professional farmer, with a lot of wisdom on organic farming practices”*.

Many interviewees shared that whenever they visit their vegetable plots, they feel as though they are no longer in Athens but in a village setting. As Fotini, from the municipal garden of Agios Dimitrios, said: *“The garden calms me down, and I feel like I am in the village, no longer in the city”*. Another gardener, whose parents were farmers, expressed a similar feeling, *“I feel like I am in the village when I visit the garden. Essentially, we are farmers, no matter how we found ourselves in the city”*, highlighting the link between the urban and the rural.

As I mentioned earlier in my findings, gardener Rita, who has built raised beds on her balcony, shared: *“I am going to start growing tomatoes and cucumbers on my balcony this summer. I want to have nature close to me”*. She also spoke about her background, saying: *“I*



**Figure 4.** *Trofotopia* self-organised food market at Vyronas squat in Athens, February, 2025.

*grew up in Athens by farmers parents. I love soil”, underlining how important access to gardening is for her. Similarly, Tasos, a gardener from the self-organised garden in Vrilissia, whose parents were farmers, told me: “I come from Epirus, and my dad was a farmer. I visit my hometown every summer where I maintain a vegetable garden together with a friend. When I am in the garden here in Athens, it doesn’t feel like I am in the city. We are so lucky to have this place and grow food ourselves”.*

While some urban dwellers engaged in the practice of the “right to the city” by maintaining vegetable plots, others engaged in different ways of urban food activism. Urban dwellers of Athens

who lack access to municipal or community gardens still find ways to shape their neighbourhoods according to their food needs. One such initiative is *Trofotopia* (Τροφοτόπια), a self-organised food pop-up market that takes place in a squat in Vyronas. It is a collective effort between producers and residents to resist the inflation of prices and support the distribution of organic fresh food, olive oil, cheese, eggs, honey, and more. The market is held on the second Saturday of each month, allowing residents of Vyronas and nearby areas to obtain food directly from small producers, without intermediaries. *Trofotopia* brings fresh garden produce into the city, even in places where establishing a physical garden may not be feasible. The group running the project *Trofotopia* also organises open general assemblies for anyone interested in contributing ideas or assistance. I attended one such meeting to observe and understand what motivates members to engage in this collective work. During the session, participants discussed practical matters such as payments to producers, restocking products, and brainstorming the design of the poster for the next self-organised market. When I shared my thesis project and the municipal gardens I had visited, I was surprised to learn that most members were unaware of their existence. They suggested that I visit several squats in different parts of Athens that had experimented with urban gardening in the past to see whether those efforts were still active.



**Figure 5.** Navarinou Park in Exarcheia, Athens, February 2025.

and spaces for movie screenings, discussions, and other types of political and cultural events. Searching online (Void Network, 2016), I found that over the years the community has organised activities such as seed exchanges, planting of vegetables and trees, and small olive harvests. When I visited the park, however, the vegetable garden did not appear to be active at the time, and only a few remaining broccoli plants were visible.

In closing, the existence of urban gardens in Athens and the practice of gardening demonstrate embodied ways of challenging the status quo regarding conventional ideas of urban landscapes and food production. My study shows how gardeners reclaim urban space, enact forms of citizenship and reimagine the city. Symbolic meanings together with memories of the past are presented through the recreation of rural practices within the urban environment. Gardens, in this way, include both the expression of the right to create a different city and the right to maintain the connections to the village.

One such place I visited during my fieldwork was Navarinou park in Exarcheia, a self-managed public park. In 2009, residents of Exarcheia and other neighbouring areas occupied what was once a private parking lot and transformed it into a green communal space. According to their blog (“Η Ιστορία του Πάρκου”), the park serves multiple purposes, as it includes a vegetable garden and orchard (*perivoli*), a playground,



**Figure 6.** Remaining broccolis at the garden of Navarinou park in Exarcheia, Athens, February 2025.

## Part IV: The emotional, ecological, and cultural meanings of urban gardens

Urban gardens in Athens found functioned as spaces with multiple emotional dimensions, where food carries valuable meanings and holds a symbolic role in gardeners lived experiences. The conversations and walks in the gardens made clear that the garden's role did not only fill a provisioning and nutritional purpose. Gardening interwove emotions, care, memories, cultural identity, as well as connection to nature and its natural rhythms, food, and to the community.

In my research, the gardens were experiences as spaces of nourishment, care, and everyday pleasure. As Christos, described, *“On Sundays I come to the garden, I have coffee and chat with the other gardeners. I take care of my plants and watch them slowly grow like they are my kids”*. Others expressed feelings of excitement and anticipation as they waited for their vegetables to grow and emphasised the importance of care and reciprocity with the land. As Stella said, *“It requires a lot of labour, but if you love and take care of the earth, it will do the same for you”*. Many gardeners also described a deeper emotional connection, noting that tending their plants cultivated a more intimate and embodied relationship with food. Several of them shared that they viewed their plants as children growing day by day, and caring for them was also a way of caring for their own inner worlds and bodies. For gardeners with children or grandchildren, growing food also carried the meaning of nurturing the bodies of loved ones. Growing organic vegetables especially, allowed them to take care of their families while offering their kids opportunities to play in nature.

Furthermore, the garden was of great significance for gardeners and was described as an embodied project made from their long-term hard work and dedication. During plot tours, gardeners proudly showed me their projects resulting from their dedicated time and effort. One participant shared before and after pictures of her plot, showcasing the transformation after days of a lot of work. She was very proud of the result and could not hide her excitement and gratitude, for what she had created.

Strong ecological motivations also appeared in the interviews. Many gardeners described feeling more connected to their “true nature” when gardening. One interviewee explained, *“I always wanted to be close to nature, and being in the garden gives me this opportunity. I also get to work on the land”*. A gardener at the self-organised garden in Vrilissia, reflected on the current state of humanity, saying, *“Today's society's problem is that modern humans have distanced themselves from nature”*. He believed that many environmental issues stem from this deep disconnection. Cultivating the land was, for him, both an escape from the chaos of Athens and a way to reconnect with nature. On a similar theme, another gardener said, *“Soil is life. I need it in my life, and so does everyone”*. Some participants began composting and followed more ecologically conscious practices as a result of gardening.



**Figure 7.** Gardener foraging wild greens at the self-organised garden in Vrillissia, Athens, March 2025.

Apart from food cultivation, foraging also influenced the sense of connection between gardeners and the natural world. For many to reflect on the Earth's generosity and express their gratitude. As one gardener said, *"Isn't it amazing how the earth nurtures you and feeds you with wild greens and plants you never sowed yourself? It gives you so generously, asking for nothing in return"*. Kiriakos, from the municipal garden of Agios Dimitrios, told me that he usually

adds the wild greens he collects to salads or omelets. Another regular forager, depicted in Figure 7,

described, *"A typical day in the garden consists of foraging wild greens. The Earth is our mother because it feeds us with all these wild greens"*. He then shared a story about a piece of land he owned once outside of Athens, where wild greens reappeared even after a nearby path had been asphalted. For him, *"The Earth is their mother, whereas for the plants cultivated by humans, it is more like a stepmother"*. These stories showcase foraging as a practice embodies emotional and symbolic meanings regarding gardeners' relationships with nature.

Gardeners also highlighted the health benefits of foraged greens. Yiannis from the municipal garden of Maroussi explained how he learned from other gardeners about the nutritional value of nettles and began incorporating them into his diet. Discussing wild greens often led gardeners to sharing their favourite recipes, the most common being "pan-fried wild greens" (*horta tsigariasta*), prepared with olive oil, lemon, and salt, while some added an egg on top. Katerina mentioned that she learned this recipe while chatting with other gardeners, showing again how knowledge sharing is central in these spaces.

Gardening also reconnected gardeners with their cultural and ancestral roots, often through traditional food practices. Foraging wild greens, which is an important tradition in many regions of Greece, was mentioned several times in gardeners' stories. As Tasos noted, *"I forage wild greens to make pita. Wild green pita is a main dish in Epirus, where I come from. This practice connects me with my home"*. Preserving traditional knowledge of food practices was a recurring topic of discussion with the interviewees. As Stella shared, *"Whenever I visit my ancestral village, I go and forage wild greens. I try to learn from the elder people and preserve the knowledge of this tradition"*. Others, such as Marina, used gardening to preserve family stories and traditions. Growing fava beans reminded her of her parents' life in Constantinople, where

this plant was a staple food. In these cases, acts of remembering, became a form of resistance against cultural erasure, a way of passing down knowledge across generations.



**Figure 8.** A gardener showing me wild greens found in their plots, Athens, February 2025.

As I mentioned already in Part II of my findings, many interviewees expressed joy in the flavours and freshness of their self-grown food. Through the interviews I strived to understand the deeper meanings of gardener's food practices and whether this had any impact on their relationship with food. Discovering new plants and ingredients for their recipes was a common experience. For many, participation in the garden enriched their culinary knowledge. As one interviewee shared, *"I learned new ingredients and recipes that I didn't know before. I learned so many simple and tasty recipes using vegetables and greens from my garden"*. Garden tours included stories about tasting raw vegetables and discovering new greens. One of the participants shared with me with great enthusiasm: *"I loved planting and growing carrots because of all the interesting and fun shapes they took while growing inside the soil. One of my favourite memories was eating raw carrots and radishes straight from the soil while gardening"*. Some gardeners started also using plants they never tasted or encountered before, such as, for example, kale or lesser-known wild greens, and have now become part of their diets.

Observing vegetables grow sparked joy, curiosity, as well as deeper respect for farmer's work. One gardener explained, *"I now have even more respect for farmers because I have experienced how much labour and time are needed to grow a single vegetable. Visiting the market and seeing the counters full of vegetables makes me admire all this hard work"*.

Gardeners' practices were structured around daily or weekly rituals and routines including watering, weeding, and chatting with others over coffee. As one gardener told me, she takes the same bus every day to visit her plot, except during the winter or on rainy days. Weather and

seasonal changes influenced these routines, making gardeners become more observant of the environmental and natural cycles. Personal circumstances such as injury or illness also disrupt routines but were met with mutual care. Theodora described how family and fellow gardeners took care of her plot after she broke her leg. Such stories showcased the importance of solidarity in sustaining both gardens and relationships.

My research found how gardeners experienced shifts in their dietary habits including higher vegetable consumption or influencing family members towards a more plant-based diet. As Roula stated, *“I have been eating more greens and vegetables now that I am growing them myself. Before that, I did not like them so much and mostly ate meat”*. Another participant shared that her daughter, although a picky eater, ate vegetables from the garden grown by her mother and felt proud of her work. Others described feeling more connected to natural cycles and more conscious regarding dietary choices. Having daily contact with their plants, witnessing their growth, and caring for them is fundamentally different from buying food at the store, shifting the perception of food as a commodity to something meaningful. Overall, feelings of gratitude, connection, and trust were shared during the conversations.

For some, their gardening practice included preserving traditional seeds. Gardeners obtained ancestral seeds from Peliti’s seed bank which is part of a Greek community in northern Greece, or through exchanges with fellow gardeners. During our interview, Theodora, told me about the box of seeds she keeps at home, including ancestral tomato seeds that are special to her. She described how theft of her plants in previous years has made her careful about what she plants in her plot each season. Marina built her own DIY seedling nursery at her plot in the municipal garden of Agios Dimitrios. All the plants in her plot were grown from seeds. She explained that other gardeners initially made fun of her nursery and doubted she could succeed, but she persisted. Using and preserving traditional seeds is an important part of her gardening practice, as she explained to me. Her practices were motivated by discussions with friends and environmental concerns regarding the planet’s health. Her desire to grow plants from seed, as well as the access to a garden plot gave her the opportunity to put her environmental values into practice. Seed saving in these stories was a practice of tradition and knowledge preservation.

Finally, food played a central role in collective activities such as gardeners’ meetings, birthdays, and Greek celebrations. Gardeners regularly brought produce to share, strengthening relationships and building systems of mutual care. As Katerina said, *“Often some of us bring some food or drinks to share and sit down to eat together. In this way we chit chat and come closer”*. In this way, sharing meals became a practice of bonding and transforming the meaning of the garden as gathering space.

Bringing these observations together, I found gardeners’ experiences and meanings multidimensional. Their lived experiences in the garden were shaped by environmental motivations, sensory joys, cultural roots, ritual, and community building. Through gardening, urban gardens transformed into spaces of connection to earth, to memory, to tradition, and to one another. Participation in gardens shifted the relationship with food from a commodity to a meaningful experience rooted in care, belonging, and identity.

## Part V: Mapping urban gardeners' personal (gendered) foodscapes and provisioning methods

In the final part of my Findings, I present the personal foodscapes of participants. Understanding the role of the garden within the broader food geographies of gardeners required looking into the different food sourcing options they relied on and the ways these methods interacted with each other. The concept of foodscapes guided my research questions and methods into the urban gardens of Athens. A significant part of my research questions and methods I made during my fieldwork in Athens. This involved using mapping as a tool to understand how gardeners obtained their food, and how the garden fits within these foodways, as well as what meanings were assigned to them.

As I have previously mentioned in my Findings, the fresh produce from the garden, although highly valued by participants, was consistently described as complementary to their needs. Therefore, identifying their additional food sourcing methods was necessary for understanding the role of the garden in the broader food provisioning of urban gardeners. These methods included the people's market (*laiki*), grocery store (*manaviko*), supermarket, ancestral village, and food exchanges.

Part of my research analysis was to create a visual map that represents gardeners' foodscapes according to the interviews and observations. The illustration (Figure 5) I present below illustrates the various food sourcing options interviewees relied on, such as garden's fresh produce, foraging, the people's market, supermarkets, and informal gift exchanges, layered over a city map of Athens to show how these practices are part of everyday urban life. This drawing is a conceptual representation of how all these provisioning methods are interconnected and not separated systems. The figure placed in the center of the map symbolises the gardener processing the various foodways, while the pathways highlight the intersection of gardeners' foodscapes, and the place of the garden within this system.



**Figure 9.** Illustrated foodscape map showcasing the different food provisioning methods of urban gardeners in Athens.

Every gardener I interviewed described the garden as a complementary food provisioning system. The garden provided them with some vegetables and greens but not sufficient enough to meet their full dietary needs. According to interviewees, garden produce is seasonal, mostly limited to winter and summer crops. My fieldwork took place in February and March, meaning that I mainly observed the landscape of winter gardens.

These were, to the most extent, similar across locations, with plots typically containing broccoli, cauliflower, kale, different types of lettuce, spring onions, cabbage, spinach, parsley, and onions. Some gardens also cultivated carrots, beetroots, chards, mustard leaves, and endives. Fewer grew peas or fava beans, and only a few managed to keep tomato plants alive through the colder months of winter. The summer plant catalogue is totally different, as participants stated. While there was not a particular behind their choices of what to grow, some interviewees did highlight their preferences and dislikes. Theodora mentioned that she avoids growing cauliflower and stopped growing beetroots after discovering she was allergic to them. Dimitra explained that her family “loves” spinach and uses it in many dishes. Laughing, she added, “*We are like Popeye, the cartoon character*”. For gardeners like Yiannis, the choice of plants was also influenced by labour demands. For example, he avoids growing onions and carrots because they require a extensive digging, so he prefers to buy them from the market. Fruits, on the other hand, had to be sourced externally, as fruit trees are not permitted in municipal plots.

Because garden’s produce was insufficient, as participants highlighted, the most frequently

mentioned external food source was the *laiki*. *Laiki* was where gardeners obtained the rest of the fresh produce that they did not grow themselves. For most of them, the market was located in their neighbourhood and visited weekly to mainly obtain vegetables and other types of foods that did not grow themselves. Stefanos, a member of *Agrosholoi*, told me, *“This winter we didn’t need to buy lettuce, broccoli, or cauliflower from laiki. We produced enough in the garden”*. He added that he avoids buying tomatoes because he grows them himself and finds cherry tomatoes too expensive, which was another reason motivating him to cultivate them in summer.

A number of gardeners mentioned that they had become more aware and selective when shopping from the farmer’s market, often choosing smaller or irregularly shaped vegetables. For one of the gardeners I interviewed, visiting the market was very personal and deeply connected to her childhood. As she shared, *“It is in my DNA to go to laiki because this is how my mother taught me when I was younger”*. Now she visits the market with her daughter, who was often gifted fruits by the farmers, when she was a baby. She further explained, *“I am buying my food from the people’s market because I know the producers and because I believe fresh produce there has higher quality than the one in the supermarkets”*. Over the years, she has built strong relationships with the producers and as she shared, *“I call the producer to ask what fruits and vegetables he has that day, and I go after work to shop. I do the same with the fisherman. He prepares my order, and I pick it up after work”*. More gardeners described similar long-term relationships with the producers and farmers of the market, built through repeated visits.

Gardeners often planned their farmer’s market visit on the same day as their trip to the garden. When I met Manos tending his plot at the municipal garden of Petroupoli, he told me that although he harvested many vegetables and salads, he would still stop by the market afterward to purchase additional fresh produce.

For gardeners with morning jobs, shopping at the people’s market was not always possible due to incompatible opening hours. In such cases, grocery stores or supermarkets were their main provisioning methods. As some interviewees indicated, supermarkets were typically used for buying processed or packaged food. One of them explained that her household tries to minimize buying food from the supermarkets to reduce their consumption of ultra-processed foods, and consuming real and whole food was a priority for them. Fresh produce was avoided being purchased from supermarkets, as gardeners associated it with lower quality and freshness than the produce from the garden or the people’s market. Supermarkets, nevertheless, remained a convenient and accessible option for most participants.

As presented earlier in my findings, several gardeners maintained connections to their ancestral villages, from which they sourced food to bring back to the city. Common food products included olive oil, olives, lemons, oranges, eggs, and cheese. Olive oil, in particular, was essential and a staple product, and some interviewees even had their own olive orchards. One gardener coming from a mountainous village in Arcadia told me about her parents’ vegetable garden, chickens and goats in the village and how important it was for her to visit it. As she explained, *“Every time we visited the village, we returned to Athens with cheese, eggs, olives, and olive oil. Nowadays my parents got older and moved to Athens”*. She added, *“Last*

*time, we harvested the olive oil ourselves with our kids with the hope that they will learn and keep doing it in the future too*". Other gardeners also received food parcels from the countryside from relatives or neighbours. Panos, from Crete, occasionally receives Cretan cheese and honey from his family. Another participant frequently receives olives, olive oil, and other local food from neighbours coming from Kalamata. These exchanges show how gift economies extend beyond the urban garden and reach out to the neighbourhood itself.

A smaller group of urban gardeners approached food provisioning through the lens of affordability and accessibility. One gardener, who shops weekly at people's market, told me that usually goes a few hours before closing to find the best prices, while another visits the supermarket on days she cannot visit the market, with food prices being an important factor when it comes to food shopping. A few reflected on the financial costs of the garden itself. Christos explained that maintaining a vegetable plot does not save money, and instead, it involves costs such as seeds, organic fertilizer, and other materials. He added that labour hours also contribute to the cost.

Labour also appeared strongly in relation to the household. Based on my analysis, a gendered foodscape became clear as an unexpected theme of my research that I had not initially planned on exploring. As interviews in urban garden of Athens carried on, a gendered division of labour appeared which made me revisit my earlier fieldwork observations. During my visits in gardens, I had noticed that the majority of gardeners present were men. The conversations with the interviewees revealed that women were the one responsible for work in the household work and kitchen that limited their time in the garden. On the other hand, male gardeners appeared to have more freedom to spend their time in gardens, which later explained their high presence I noticed in the gardens.

The foodscapes of the household as well as of the kitchen appeared as gendered spaces in this study. Labour division in the Greek household was influenced by traditional gendered notions. Most participants described household work related to food such as cooking, preparing, and planning, as women's responsibility. One male gardener explained, "*At home, my wife is the one in charge. I am the head of the house, but she is the neck, which means she is usually the one making decisions regarding food and the household in general*", implying that she directs household decisions, especially those about food while he takes up the role of financial provider. His explanation describes both the hierarchical structure of the household and the gendered meanings of each member's role within it.

For some male gardeners, especially those you have retired, their participation to the garden was associated with a feeling of freedom as well as distance from household responsibilities or their partners. As one participant explained, "*I come to the garden so that I don't spend the whole day with my wife and end up fighting. I often wake up earlier than her and come here to avoid her asking me to run errands*". Another commented, "*My wife is the one doing the food groceries because she wants to be in charge of the household. Sometimes I help her by driving the car*". He added, "*My wife tells me to leave the house at nine in the morning and come back at two in the afternoon when lunch is ready. In this way she has control of the house*". He

admitted that this way was very convenient and that traditional gender roles “make life easier for men”.

While some female interviewees, like Dimitra, described more flexible food planning in her household, “*If I am tired or don't feel like it, I ask someone else to cook something simple*”, the daily food practices were largely characterised by traditional gender ideas. The kitchen was commonly described as a female oriented space and household management was assigned as a woman's responsibility, while spending time and socialising at the garden was considered mainly a male activity. Some male participants reflected on their privilege, though others saw the garden as an escape from household labour or, as a few phrased it, from their wives' “nagging”.

To conclude, this part mapped participants' foodscapes, showing their food provisioning practices and the diverse role of the garden within their urban food geographies. Urban gardens hold a significant meaning in the everyday lives of gardeners, however, this study showed that they complement rather than replace other sourcing methods. At the same time, gardens' symbolic meanings and their connection to cultural traditions, family histories, personal values influence food practices such as shopping as well as household work. Everyday practices in particular, were found to be shaped by traditional ideas around gender. This study revealed how foodscapes such as the garden or the kitchen are gendered, with women being responsible for the kitchen and household, while men enjoy the social aspects of the garden. Overall, these foodscapes support the notion that urban gardening in Athens is part of a larger network of cultural, social, and relational meanings that play a role in how gardeners value and interact with food.

## 4. Discussion

This thesis sets out to explore how urban vegetable gardens in Athens play a role in providing fresh food to urbanites. Additionally, this research studies gardens in relation to other food provisioning methods and looks into the motivations behind gardeners' choices, considering how these shape the overall relationship between urban dwellers and food. By highlighting the lived experiences around food practices, whether in gardens, markets, or kitchens, I sought to unravel the emotional, cultural, and social dimensions of gardeners' foodscapes. I also emphasised the importance of identifying the meanings people give to their food practices and lived realities in gardens or other food sourcing spaces, including how these practices act as forms of resistance to the privatization and commodification of urban space and food and apply their right to a different and more socially as well as environmentally just city.

Fieldwork research in six different urban gardens provided several personal narratives, observations and rich insights into urban gardening and food provisioning in Athens. The analysis process of my data revealed five main themes:

1. Therapeutic and socialising aspects of urban gardens in Athens
2. The food provisioning role of urban gardens and ecosystems of care
3. The right to a different city expressed through memories of the village and food desires
4. The emotional and cultural meanings of urban gardens and the connection with nature and traditions
5. Personal and gendered foodscapes: Mapping differences in roles, responsibilities, and labour.

Having presented these five central themes, I now discuss the findings in relation to the research questions. In the following part, I revisit the questions guiding this thesis and elaborate on the meaning found in my findings by incorporating my observations and insights. In addition, I highlight the contribution of this work to expanding our understanding of urban gardens in Athens and minimizing gaps in the existing literature. This reflection is also important for contextualising the broader aspects of my study and inviting further research and practice.

### 1. Therapeutic and socialising aspects of urban gardens in Athens

One of the strongest themes that emerged from my fieldwork research was the therapeutic benefits of gardening and the social aspects of participating in the garden. Interviewees frequently described gardening as a source of joy, a way to relieve stress and an escape from the hectic city environment. Many gardeners stated that gardens are essential for socialising, especially for retirees seeking spaces to interact with others. My findings can resonate with existing research on the mental, social, and physical health benefits of urban gardens as spaces

contributing to reduced anxiety and improved mood and self-esteem (Wood et al., 2016; Zutter & Stoltz, 2023; Turner, 2023).

Gardeners in my research shared feelings of peace and serenity from working with soil and being in nature, relating to the study of Zutter and Stoltz (2023). At the same time, social interactions were also significant, fostering mutual trust, reciprocity and community building. Previous studies have shown that social processes in urban community gardens can build social cohesion (Hou, 2017; Teig et al., 2009). Practices such as knowledge exchange, food sharing, casual conversations and collective decision-making were shown to be important factors in facilitating relationships among participants. For instance, Sundays spent in the garden over coffee while chatting with other members, passers-by, or friends highlighted the garden as a gathering space. These connections, apart from improving individuals' well-being, are also revitalizing neighbourhoods and strengthening interpersonal bonds (Hou, 2017; Zutter & Stoltz, 2023).

Gardens are spaces to gather (Pitt, 2019) and facilitate regular encounters that can contribute to the development of a sense of belonging. It is important, however, to mention that urban gardening literature often presents an idealistic version of community depicted as harmonious and coherent where all members share friendly relationships (Neo & Chua, 2017; Pitt, 2019). In reality, conflicts are often commonly experienced in such communal spaces, with some authors describing them even as inherently exclusive (Neo & Chua, 2017; Pitt, 2019; Larsson & Nygren, 2023b). Municipal support issues, such as water provision, significantly affected cooperation. In addition, access to urban gardens of this study was limited to socio-economic criteria, carrying exclusionary characteristics (Neo & Chua, 2017). Despite these challenges and gardens reflecting sites of conflict, the primary value of gardens in Athens was therapeutic, providing peace, escape, and social connection. Beyond this, gardeners valued the gardens for access to organic and seasonal food, another theme I explore in the following part.

## 2. The food provisioning role of urban gardens and ecosystems of care

Access to organic, seasonal fresh food was another point that stood out in my fieldwork research. Gardeners described their self-grown food as 'clean' and exceptionally tasty, incomparable to supermarket or farmer's market produce. The absence of pesticides was particularly important for families feeding children that considered garden produce safer and healthier. Many gardeners felt reassured about the quality and healthiness of their food, while others valued aspects of seasonality and flavour. Moreover, knowing exactly where their food comes from and being part of the growing process gave participants a sense of trust and pride that store-bought food could not offer.

These interpretations of good and 'clean' food also reflected moral dimensions such as the 'what is right' as described by Sovová et al. (2021). This moral was connected to feelings of care for the gardens as well as for their families and friends. Gardeners often distributed fresh produce to relatives, friends, neighbours and work colleagues, creating an alternative food provisioning

system (Sovová et al., 2021) aligned with Gibson-Graham's (2008) notion of diverse economies, where non-market transactions such as gift-giving play a central role. Knowledge sharing, seeds exchanges, and gardening advice that I observed in my findings, contributed to intergenerational learning and culture preservation. Recipes and advice on how to use specific plants were also exchanged, reflecting the role of gardens in daily food practices of gardeners. These sharing practices are reflected by Belk' (2010) argument that sharing is a powerful way to connect to others and foster mutual support and bonding. Cooking and eating together, as another bonding ritual, fostered "temporary collective spaces of encounter and hospitality", ( Marovelli, 2018), creating what can be described as of care. Tronto & Fisher (1990) defined care as a "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible".

Care practices in urban gardens stretched across human and more than human worlds (Bankovska & Lukasik, 2025). As Bowlby and McKie (2019) note, informal caring is an embodied activity rooted in reciprocity, involving the use of resources, time, and space. Acts of care appeared in sharing meals, exchanging resources, or taking care of another gardener's plot when they were unable to attend. These everyday care practices resonated with what Kotsila et al. (2020), describe as "materialities of care", shaped not only by physical objects such as seeds, tools, food, but also by emotional and social factors including cooking and eating together, or watering someone else's plot.

Taken everything into account food provisioning and everyday acts of care in urban gardens of Athens entangled tangible and intangible elements of foodscapes forming part of broader urban mobilisations that negotiate political and institutional restrictions.

### 3. The right to a different city expressed through memories of the village and food desires

During my fieldwork I started referring to gardeners as "gardizens" a term combining the words 'gardeners' and 'citizens'. I use this concept to emphasize the dual role of many participants including the practice of cultivating while cultivating also forms of citizenship. Gardizens engaged in practices that moved beyond food production, including collective organizing, repurposing public space, and forming ecosystems of care. This concept, therefore, encompasses how participants, through gardening and other food practices, actively shape urban environment according to social, cultural, and food needs.

Gardeners' practices reflected resistance to decisions made by institutions and local authorities. Urban gardens served not only as spaces of conviviality and collective care but also as spaces for citizenship. For example, the demolition of the municipal vegetable garden in Agioi Anargyroi to build a technological center, highlighted struggles over who decides how an urban public space is used. In addition, gardens in Athens became places of resistance against neoliberal development practices as well as the privatization of urban space. Reclaiming the urban commons by grassroots social movements in Greece, became prominent especially during

the times of the economic crisis and years of austerity, when citizens mobilized to demand a better quality of life that state's measures negatively impacted (Apostolopoulou, 2021). As I mentioned already in my thesis, urban gardening has been happening for years in the yards of urbanites for domestic food provisioning. With major urbanization and the construction of *polykatoikies*, domestic gardens started to disappear (Lionatou & Tsalikidis, 2013). Community gardening initiatives emerged with the aim to combat the broken Greek welfare system, reappropriate public space, reconnect the urban with the rural, and challenge the present food regime (Apostolopoulou, 2021; Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2015).

The self-organized community garden of *Agrosholoi* in Vrilissia embodies these goals since 2011 (Anthopoulou, 2015). Lefebvre's notion of the "right to the city" in this case manifests through the act of reclaiming public space so that community practices take place. Moreover, the gardizens of the community garden in Vrilissia, as it was found in my fieldwork and supported by Anthopoulou's (2015), brought to life this initiative to practice organic agriculture, reconnect with the natural cycles, and foster solidarity. These goals align with what Lefebvre calls 'autogestion' or self-management, a political act opposing government control over space and prioritizing everyday communal needs (Butler, 2012).

Community gardens like *Agrosholoi* implement these strategies by self-managing public land and creating opportunities for social activities and connections, linking to the urban characteristic as a space of 'gathering' . (Lefebvre, 1996; Lefebvre, 2003). In contrast, the municipal vegetable garden of Agioi Anargyroi showcases how municipal control can limit urban gardens' potential. Continuous hostility and threats led to its closure, weakening gardeners' ability to resist. On the contrary, in Vrilissia, gardeners cultivated trust and collaboration with the municipality, gaining access to land and recognition for their efforts and contribution to the local community. As a result, *Agrosholoi* continued and expanded the role of the garden beyond food production into cultural and educational practices. This resonates with the notion of the "right to the city" which frames "the urban" not only as a place of residence but also as a space to connect, play, and learn (Purcell, 2014; Lefebvre, 1996). The city belongs to the people who live in it and Lefebvre's notion is an essential element of a struggle for revolution for a societal transformation.

Apart from the political role, urban gardens also carried meanings shaped by memories and practices linked to gardeners' ancestral villages and rural pasts. For many interviewees, growing their own food in urban plots was not only about claiming the "right to the city" but also about re-connecting with family histories, rural traditions and practices displaced by urban living. Several gardeners, maintained plots to preserve knowledge passed down from peasant parents, expressing also feelings of nostalgia for their rural pasts. These insights can be seen as expressions of 'agrarian nostalgia' connected to homegrown traditional food and intergenerational memories (Timothy, 2016).

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed a longing for the ancestral homeland expressed through practicing gardening and spending time outside in nature. Over the years, the Greek countryside has been significantly transformed, with many people moving between rural and urban areas (Kasimis & Papadopoulos, 2013). Yet, for many urban dwellers, strong emotional ties to their

rural ancestry are still active, together with the desire to preserve and continue their family heritage (Koutsou et al., 2011b). In this case, food practices are entangled with memory and an active awakening of past feelings and experiences (Knight, 2012). In most of the gardens I visited, I found a sense of “collective nostalgia”, which as Timothy (2016) suggests, helps people hold on to a feeling of stability in a world that continuously changes. Additionally, the interest in practices related to the countryside can also be connected to current efforts to blur the urban-rural binary, as Kasimis & Papadopoulos (2013) have noted. The desire of the gardizens to connect with their past was manifested in various ways, including creating vegetable beds on apartment balconies or maintaining smaller vegetable gardens and nurseries on the rooftops of building blocks. Urban living spaces were thus transformed according to both food and cultural needs.

In many ways, these gardens acted as ‘villages within the city’, places that reminiscent of the past and rural life, associated with care and safety (Sucksmith, 2016). Building on that, Homs (2007) argues that the notion of the ‘urban village’, a community organization model within the cities, embodies localism, aiming to recreate social cohesion and combat urban anonymity. Similarly, the gardens I studied can be viewed as localised micro-communities where self-management, proximity, and communal responsibility are fundamental principles. Drawing from Fotopoulos ‘s (2001), concept of the ‘demos’, which is close to the concept of the ‘urban villages’, these kinds of initiatives represent forms of inclusive democracy, where inhabitants self-manage the local resources aiming for self-sufficiency. Municipal support plays a crucial role in the longevity of these urban gardens. It, therefore, becomes clear that a supportive stance from the municipality encourages active and inclusive urban spaces, while neglect as seen in Agioi Anargyroi, limits community-building potential.

Ultimately, urban vegetable gardens in Athens embody political, cultural and caring spaces, where resistance to urban planning and connections to rural past intersect. Through shared work, exchange and sharing, collective decision-making, gardeners form small communities and reshape the urban environment based on values of solidarity and cultural preservation.

#### 4. The emotional and cultural meanings of urban gardens and the connection with nature and traditions

Urban gardens fostered deeply emotional and embodied experiences. Gardeners expressed that these gardens are places where relationships of care for land, food, and community are cultivated every day. The practice of growing food was connected not only to sustenance but also to care for the self, others, and nature. Maintenance work such as watering, weeding, or harvesting was often translated as among human and non-humans, portraying gardening as an emotional practice.

As McKlintock (2010) argues, gardening is a ‘force of de-alienation’ from the natural world, which capitalist urban environments have created. Many gardeners expressed the joy of touching and working with the soil, viewing it as an essential element to the cycle of growth. In their own words, “Soil is life, I need it in my life”, resonating with Bennett’s (2010) notion of the ‘vibrant

matter' which emphasizes the vitality and agency of the soil. Through composting and nurturing soil health, gardeners cultivated relationships of reciprocity and a sense of belonging to the land (Turner, 2011). This attentiveness to the non-human, not only creates co-learning experiences but also challenges hierarchical views that place humans above nature (Bennett, 2010).

Interviewees also expressed emotional attachment to their plants, often describing them as their children growing day by day. Gardens became spaces of responsibility, commitment, and belonging (Sovová et al., 2021). In times when incidents of theft or damage occurred, gardeners expressed feelings of sadness and being violated reflecting the investment of time, effort, and care put into their plot (Turner, 2011).

Additional meanings emerged around self-fulfillment and pride. Food grown in gardens was described as 'sacred', representing physical labour, time, care, as well as autonomy forming meaningful and embodied connection to their foodscape that cannot be measured with economic terms. As McClintock (2010) argues, the socio-cultural importance of food goes against its commodification. Self-growing one's food, thus, becomes an act of de-commodification. Practices such as seed saving, maintaining traditional varieties, and foraging wild greens reflected ecological awareness, resistance to industrial food systems, and preservation of cultural memory and knowledge (Hoover, 2017; Keeve, 2020; Shackleton et al., 2017).

Gardeners engaged in foraging wild greens as a source of fresh food, which facilitated a stronger connection to place and nature and contributed to improved physical and mental health, benefits, also identified in previous research (Shackleton et al., 2017; Guenat et al., 2023). Some interviewees mentioned harvesting wild plants their ancestors collected in their homelands, emphasizing foraging as a way to maintain biocultural knowledge (Shackleton et al., 2017). One participant explained that they learned to distinguish edible wild plants from elders in their ancestral village and shared the importance of keeping this tradition alive. In this case, elderly people acted as local knowledge holders of foraging traditions, preserving culture and identity (Pieroni et al. (2014). These stories and food traditions are passed down across generations forming a collective memory and representing a radical act of resistance against cultural erasure (Nuh, 2024).

Collective emotions were central in my findings. Shared meals, celebrations, and communal care contributed to 'ecosystems of care'. Gardens offered refuge from the stressful and hectic city living, emphasizing their therapeutic benefits. The emotional dimensions of these foodscapes move between the personal and the political, the intimate and the collective, demonstrating alternative food provisioning that embodies care, culture, memory, narratives, identity, and resistance. Drawing from Lévi-Strauss's (1965) idea, food practices became mediums to express cultural identity and connect past, present, and collective experience.

## 5. Personal and gendered foodscapes: Mapping differences in roles, responsibilities, and labour

Findings reveal that urban gardens complement other food provisioning methods, forming relational foodscapes, interconnected with -air markets, grocery stores, supermarkets, and alternative sources such as foraging and receiving produce from relatives in the countryside. The garden's role, though complementary, was highly valued for freshness, relational aspects, autonomy and connection to nature. These findings resonate with Sovová's et al. (2021) argument that self-provisioning practices can be part of diverse economies, characterized by social aspects.

As I mentioned previously gardeners' expressions of pride in cultivating their own food and their appreciation for seasonal and organic produce, aligned with McClintock's (2010) idea of "reclaiming the commons", where food production is de-commodified and meaningful connections among people, food, and place are formed. Adding more to this thought, gardens can also be considered 'ethical foodscapes', embodying ecological and social justice as well as personal ethic of care (Morgan, 2010). Practices such as growing organic food, saving seeds, and sharing food carry ethical meanings, forming a 'moral economy' rooted in trust and shared values (Psarikidou & Szerszynski, 2012; Goodman, 2004; Goodman et al., 2010; Graham-Gibson, 2006)

This was evident in my fieldwork, where relationships among gardeners and local producers in the open-air markets, as well as with relatives and friends from their villages who sent them fresh produce, were rooted in trust and care rather than profit. Gardeners also continued to rely on supermarkets for food provisioning, showing how ethical and moral economies coexist with conventional food systems, forming a foodscape that celebrates a system of diverse economies aligned with Gibson-Graham's (2006) vision of postcapitalist politics. Gardeners' foodscapes, therefore, convey ethical and moral economies where food embodies care, reciprocity, and identity.

While gardeners' food practices showed values of care, solidarity and reciprocity they also revealed gendered patterns. Interestingly, though it was not initially part of my research design and conceptual framework I had chosen to apply, gendered foodscapes emerged during my fieldwork. My findings demonstrate that the foodscapes in this study, from the urban gardens to households and kitchens, are influenced by gender. Drawing from feminist political ecology and the feminist foodscapes framework, gender can be seen as a dynamic and political social construct that, as Hovorka (2022) describes, shapes roles, responsibilities, and meanings around food production and consumption. It influences who grows, prepares, and accesses food, as well as the values and identities attached to these practices (Moore, 1988; Julier, 2006). Moreover, gender plays a role at various levels, from the individual to the household, to the city and to the global levels (Riley & Hovorka, 2015).

Through mapping the personal foodscapes of participants, it became evident that daily food practices were deeply marked by gendered divisions and responsibilities. Female gardeners were mostly responsible for managing the household work such as cooking, cleaning, shopping for

groceries, storing, planning meals and dealing with food waste. The kitchenscape of these Greek households is thus highly gendered and considered a woman's space as emphasized in Liu's (2024) work. In contrast, male gardeners described their participation in the urban gardens as leisure, socializing or in some cases, an escape from domestic responsibilities and labour. This information confirms that foodscapes, apart from their spatial and physical aspects, are also characterized by social and cultural dimensions and influenced by social practices and power dynamics (Vonthron et al., 2020).

According to this study's findings, the way domestic labour is divided in most participants' households reflects traditional gender norms in which women are responsible for the daily food provisioning as well as other household tasks since they are traditionally considered the nourishers of the family (DeVault, 1994; Bell & Valentine, 1997). Male gardeners from my study shared how their wives were associated with the decision-making regarding household labour while considering themselves the 'head' of the house as well as the providers. This traditional division of domestic labour reflects power dynamics in the different roles that are assigned to men and women within the household. Such contrasts in practices of daily life and food planning connected to gender show their influence on foodscapes (Bergonzini, 2025).

These gendered roles and practices in my research were not only practical but also symbolic reinforcing societal expectations about the role of female and male within the food system. Nevertheless, the urban gardens offered a space where female gardeners could negotiate these traditional roles through self-expressing and by re-establishing their role within the household and community. Liu (2024) argues that the kitchen as a space can reinforce both gender roles and patriarchal patterns while also fostering women's power and providing opportunities to challenge and reshape these norms. Similarly, in the context of this study, the garden appeared to be a parallel space of autonomy and self-determination, where female gardeners could cultivate not only fresh food but also confidence, independence, and control over the household's food provisioning.

Bringing all the findings of this section together, through mapping of the participants' foodscapes, it became clear that the role of the urban gardens is to the biggest extent a complementary food source which carries distinct multidimensional benefits. Gardeners mentioned *laiki*, *manaviko*, and supermarkets as the main food provisioning sources. Additional methods included foraging and receiving food from the countryside, relatives, friends, and neighbours creating meaningful connections in the community and linking to the rural past, embodying care, mutual aid, and cultural celebration. The foodscapes studied revealed gendered food-related practices and spaces that hold strong influence. Urban gardens while serving as places for food growing, relaxation, leisure, and connecting with nature, also represented gendered environments where power relations and traditional gender roles are both reproduced and reinterpreted. For some female gardeners, the garden became an extension of their role as care-workers and food providers, as well as a space to express creativity and practice various skills. In this way, the gendered urban gardens in Athens reflect both continuity and subtle resistance against traditional gender norms.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis was aimed at exploring the role of urban gardens of Athens in the provisioning of fresh food and understanding their relationship with the broader foodscapes of the participants is. By looking into gardeners' motivations for choosing specific food sources and how these choices shape their relationship with food, I aimed to present a holistic view of the current urban foodways in the capital of Greece. To achieve this, I focused on mapping participants' foodscapes to identify both the material and symbolic dimensions of food provisioning, as well as the lived experiences and meanings connected to food practices and the activities in the gardens. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1968) notion of the "right to the city", I observed how urbanites interact with the urban environment and shape it based on their food desires.

During my fieldwork, I visited six vegetable gardens, five municipals and one self-organized, to conduct participant observation and interviews with the gardeners. The ethnographic and qualitative research approach enabled me to access the gardens, meet participants, and observe their practices directly. This approach also gave participants space to share personal stories and experiences giving them space and freedom to express their feelings and views in an authentic way, while allowing for spontaneous moments of observation and reflection that might have not arisen in a formal seated interview.

The urban gardens of Athens in this study were vivid examples of multifunctional spaces encompassing food cultivation, relaxation, and socialising, and offering several benefits to their members. This study revealed that although urban gardens provide only a small portion of fresh food, the produce holds significant meaning for gardeners. Food from the garden being organic, seasonal, high quality, was highly appreciated along with the connection it fosters with nature. Gardeners described the garden's fresh produce as superior and even 'sacred' compared to the one from supermarkets or other sources and shared feelings of autonomy and pride in consuming what they had grown themselves.

Apart from the material provisioning, the gardens had symbolic, emotional, and social dimensions of foodscapes. Several themes emerged from the analysis. First, the gardens functioned as spaces with strong therapeutic and social aspects. Gardeners emphasized the joy, serenity, and sense of escape from the chaos of the city that they experienced in the gardens. For many pensioners, the traditional *kafeneio* (café) was replaced by urban gardens as a gathering place contributing to new social bonds and a sense of belonging. Additionally, the gardens offered a space for celebrating, meeting up with friends, connecting with other gardeners, and making collective decisions, creating a space for active citizenship.

Urban gardens of this study found to be entangled within a system of diverse food provisioning methods, such as open-air markets (*laiki*), grocery store (*manaviko*), supermarkets, but also food sharing, foraging, and produce from the countryside. Participants often received foods such as olive oil, honey, cheese, eggs and other traditional products

from their ancestral villages or through exchanges with neighbours and relatives. Foraging wild plants was also another food source that preserves culture and tradition. These food practices formed an ecosystem of care in which food, knowledge, and seeds are shared or exchanged, reflecting ethical economies based on trust and mutual aid.

Furthermore, the gardens emerged as spaces where the idea of the “right to the city” could be enacted. As explained in the introduction, privatisation is a prominent issue in modern Athens, requiring citizens to mobilise to claim public space. The demolition of the municipal vegetable garden in Agioi Anargyroi clearly showed how the lack of institutional support and contested land control can influence how the city is shaped and the extent to which urban dwellers have any influence over it. Gardeners also shared how the gardens sparked memories of their ancestral villages and rural upbringing, showing how these spaces bridge the rural-urban dichotomy specifically in a country with long agricultural tradition.

Within the exploration of the emotional dimensions of gardening, these foodscapes were found to be shaped by personal, political and collective ideas and meanings. Gardens represented the embodied experience and knowledge of the gardeners as well as subtle forms of resistance against industrial food systems. Practices such as ancestral seed keeping and foraging embodied efforts to protect tradition and maintain indigenous wisdom. Participants’ lived experiences in these spaces had a distinct effect on their relationship with food which was also shaped by the politics of care as mentioned in my discussion.

Finally, this thesis shows how gardeners’ foodscapes are gendered. Male gardeners associated the garden as a space of relaxation and socialising with other members. Female participants, on the other hand, were primarily responsible for household labour such as planning and cooking. Nevertheless, urban gardens could be also viewed as places of enhancing confidence and autonomy for female gardeners, challenging traditional norms regarding gender roles.

Bringing everything together, the role of Athens’ urban gardens in fresh food provisioning though limited regarding quantity is rich in meaning, narratives, and valuable experiences. They provide not only vegetables but also spaces for practicing care and community, and opportunities to reclaim the relationship with land and food. Urban gardens are interconnected with other food sourcing methods, influenced by participants’ lived experiences in these spaces. They also reveal the temporality and the risk they are under due to the lack of institutional frameworks and stable long-term municipal support, linking back to the issues such as rapid urbanization, public land privatization and declining socially and environmentally just urban policies. Finally, this thesis highlights the multifunctionality of gardens, their embeddedness in Athens’ food geographies and their role in promoting urban resilience and social cohesion.

## Limitations

In this section of my thesis, I would like to point out the limitations of my research. These are mainly about the time my fieldwork took place which impacted on the process of finding participants, the diversity of the group of interviewees, and the duration of my research.

As I mentioned before, this ethnographic research was conducted during the winter months where there is limited and sporadic participation due to the low temperatures and low maintenance need of the plants. The decreased and sporadic availability of interviewees coupled with the challenging way of getting access to the gardens to conduct interviews resulted in a less diverse group of participants. The majority of interviewees consisted of retirees of the low and middle-class economic strata that influenced the answers I received and the results of my study.

Additionally, the ethnographic approach of my research together with the constraint time of my fieldwork limited the creation of close relationships with the gardeners. This also impacted the opportunity to build deeper sense of trust as the nature of this type of research requires, as explained in my Methodology.

Finally, my positionality as a researcher impacted on the ways gardeners chose to answer and the stories and information they shared with me. As I have already explained, the common background I shared with the participants didn't exclude misunderstandings or biases regarding the way interviewees responded during interviews.

## Future Research Recommendations

To gain better understanding about the role of urban gardens of Athens on an individual but also a societal level, as urban foodscapes, further research should be conducted.

Conducting research in the urban gardens during the spring and summer season could offer different perspectives about the food provisioning role but also about the social dimensions of those spaces as gardeners visit them more often these months. Moreover, involving a more diverse group of participants and reaching out to younger gardeners could enlighten us on intergenerational dynamics but also give diverse insights regarding the role of the gardens on a provisioning and emotional level.

Furthermore, I believe that future research on the policy and the institutional frameworks about urban gardens should be conducted since there is clear evidence of their temporality and fragility as entities. The lack of municipal support as well as diverse inclusion in becoming a member of the gardens puts them at risk of being demolished. Doing more research to emphasize their multifunctional role and benefits could be a preventative way.

Lastly, research on the internal governing structure, types of stakeholder engagement, as well as the relation of the project implementation to EU, national, or local policy or strategy would be another point of interest that could dive deeper into the structural and organizational aspects of these initiatives and provide more transparency. Understanding the role of the authorities and stakeholders involved could be critical for the long-term sustenance of the gardens and for becoming part of urban planning.

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**Figure 10.** Urban dweller going back home after shopping at *laiki*, Athens, March 2025.