

Multispecies Care in the Urban Gardening Practices in Finland¹

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In this photo essay, I reflect on the initial stages of my ethnographic fieldwork in three urban and semi-urban gardens in the greater Helsinki area, Finland, undertaken from April to June 2022. I look at the gardens as sites of multispecies care beyond the mere provisioning of food for humans, and work around two central questions: What are the relationships between humans and more-than-humans in the gardens? What is the shape and role of care in these relationships?

My research compares three different gardening forms to find out whether relationships between humans and more-than-humans are experienced and manifested differently across them. Focussing on three underlying themes—pollinators, ‘unwanted’ species and soil—I observe and talk to the gardeners about whether they even think about other species. Who do they care about and how do they express their care?

The first gardens are plantation plots located in the Greater Helsinki area. These plots are a gardening form carried out on land usually rented from the city. For a small yearly fee, each gardener works on their own plot. In general, the gardening colony follows democratically agreed-on rules for gardening practice. Nevertheless, my initial observations show that the multispecies relationships and practices of care unfolding in each plot can be very different. In some plots, human gardeners are more aware of the other species and try to garden by balancing the relationships of care between different species, whether or not the species are considered useful from a human perspective. In other plots, species such as hares, moles, birds, mice, weeds, and other ‘unwanted’ species are considered much less important than the cared-for ‘useful’ species, which are mainly food crops for humans.

The second gardening practice is in the relatively industrial district in Helsinki, sandwiched between residential houses. These gardens are a communal initiative based on the voluntary involvement of anyone who wishes to participate in gardening. Here, gardening is built around caring relationships for species, both those that are grown and those that frequent the gardens. Improvised hare fences stand along with purposefully tended patches of pollinator plants. A hedgehog house is kept in good condition parallel to tedious manual weeding throughout the season. Meanwhile, black and red currant bushes serve as a common food source both for humans and different bird species.

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Finally, using an autoethnographic approach, I analyse my small terrace garden in the suburban area which I have been tending to for nine seasons. Being an ethnographer and gardener simultaneously I pay attention to my relationships with species, mainly pollinators and birds. I care for pollinators by growing flowers and plants that seemingly have no use to me. I also learn to care for birds, squirrels and a forest mouse family sharing with them my crop.

During the research, I have felt challenged by the prevailing human-centred approaches in the existing body of literature about urban and semi-urban gardening practices. Trying to find ways to look at caring from a multispecies perspective became one of the main tasks during the first season of my fieldwork. I focused on attentiveness (Van Dooren, Kirksey and Munster 2015) and noticing (Poikolainen Rosen, Normark and Wiberg 2022) as important practices. Apart from spending time with human gardeners I also attended the field sites outside the times of active gardening, in the early mornings and late evenings. In the communal garden in the centre of Helsinki, I spent time outside of the official co-working days on Wednesdays and Sundays. I also attempted to expand my senses beyond visual observation to include listening, smelling, and touching. Non-verbal research and thinking methods such as photography, doodling and drawing have become a big part of my journey.



The plantation plot gardens in the middle of April. In the foreground, the public skiing tracks are still shimmering in the sun. As I briskly walk by the gardens I stop for a while to observe and listen. I first hear and then notice that a few very active crowds of thrush (*Turdidae*) are frantically looking for the worms. They seem very determined and hungry to get ready for the new breeding season. Thrushes have started the gardening season before their companions and competitors, humans, start arriving at the gardens by taking over the gardening plots and surrounding territory. Their strong beaks are digging up the soil in the few snow-free garden plots and surrounding lawn patches. The air is bursting with the polyphony of their loud conversations offering a promise of the active start of the gardening season.



The spring in Finland that often quickly turns into summer usually starts at the very end of May. It is the time when, with a certain amount of risk, I and many gardeners plant the seedlings outside hoping no frosts will threaten our plants. I started growing my pepper plants in February, inside, under the DIY plant lights. To protect the valuable plants when I move them outside, I take extra precautions to cover them with a protective cloth. It is not unusual that night temperatures in May and June can linger below 10C.



Different animals have their strategies for obtaining food and other goods that are provided in these mainly human-made environments. Maija, one of the gardeners tells, that the pink crocheted hangers are meant to work as a 'scarecrow' for thrushes and hedgehogs alike. "And do they work?" I ask. She shrugs, laughs lightly, and says: "I don't know."



Tina in her garden has taken protective measures against another two interested parties: hares (*Lepus europaeus*) and small white or cabbage white butterflies (*Pieris rapae*). The protective construction is made of metal ribbons and repurposed curtains bought from the local second-hand shop and shelters different plants in the brassica family. Tina thinks the construction is serving its purpose, as the holes in the curtains are very tiny to deter the small flying animals while allowing rain and light to get through. The construction serves well too in protecting the tiny plants, mainly different salads, and cabbages, against hares.



Mike's garden is on the corner and borders the road that cuts the garden colony into two parts. The corner location means that the garden is often first on the way to the wind gusts. The broad beans are planted on the border. Mike tells me that what looks like weeds among the beans is his way of gardening and protecting the beans from the winds. He plans to remove the weeds that are too big and that will compete with the beans for nutrients. The smaller plants will be kept as extra protection for the beans.



In the plot gardens, Mike tells me that in spring every time he is in the garden, undoing the feast of birds in the onion beds is one of the jobs that must be done caring for his crop. Birds search for the earthworms under the newly planted bulbs. The freshly worked soil and frequent spring rain help the birds. Yet, Mike is patient, and every single time tucks the bulbs back into the soil.



This year I bought new strawberry plants for my terrace garden. It became clear very soon that a great share of the small number of berries I will be getting will go to our new winged neighbours, black thrush or blackbird (*Turdus merula*). The birds' demeanour and behaviour are very relaxed and confident while they wander around the strawberry bushes and check out other possible goods on the terrace. I cannot object to the birds sharing this garden and its fruits. Thus, I have accepted that possibly I have planted these strawberries for the blackbirds this year.



For several seasons I have grown my marigold plants from the seed, and they have been a key species in my terrace garden. Marigolds are one of the most beneficial plants in the garden. They are known for their protective and companion qualities for so many other plants, especially ones people consider useful. However, they seem to be not the first choice, at least not at the beginning of the gardening season, of the bees and butterflies that frequent my garden. Nevertheless, during my first season of research I was happy to find out that, eventually, marigolds seem to be liked by hoverflies.

Works Cited

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