

## Article

# Growing the Beautiful Anthropocene: Ethics of Care in East European Food Gardens

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**Abstract:** This study contributes to research proposing the ethics of care framework as a way of imagining a food system that cares for Others. We expand this exploration to the everyday practice of home gardening and the related social relationships and material flows. This area complements current scholarship, which mostly focuses on food-related care as a form of activism driven by intentionality and knowledge about the effects of consumption choices. Combining a survey of a representative sample of the population and an in-depth qualitative study, our paper highlights the importance of inconspicuous but materially significant food self-provisioning and sharing practices as caring behaviors that do not rely on educational campaigns but draw on the desire to produce healthy food for human Others. Home grown food is distributed in the generalized reciprocity mode within wide food-sharing networks. The desire to produce healthy food further translates into the adoption of caring methods of cultivation that benefit non-human Others involved in the garden ecosystems.



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## 1. Introduction

The care perspective and the ethics of care framework are increasingly seen as possible ways to imagine a food system that cares for Others—both human and non-human—as “a vision compelling enough to provoke cultural and political change” [1] (p. 369). In this paper, we respond to the invitation to “experiment with articulating a different Anthropocene” by rethinking, through the lens of the geography of caring and responsibility, gardens and related material flows as one of the possible “fragments of a beautiful Anthropocene” [1] (p. 369). In doing so, we are motivated by the centrality of the food system in damaging planetary ecosystems (“if the Anthropocene is anything at all, it is steadfastly agricultural”; [2] p. 536) and the increasingly urgent need to find ways of organizing a better food supply. We take inspiration from critiques of the dominant focus in sustainable/ethical consumption research and policy on “tackling complex global problems through appeals to the responsibilities of consuming subjects” [3] (p. 1397), who are conditioned to their caring behavior by knowledge and reason [4].

Attempting to break with this approach, in this paper we consider the importance of the ethics of everyday, localized, non-market, and informal practices of home food production, distribution, and consumption. We refer to this set of practices as food self-provisioning (FSP). Despite the significance of their scale (which in terms of the volume of produced food often exceeds that of market-based food alternatives in the formal economic sphere, such as organic food) and transformative potential, they have tended to be overlooked in the literature (for recent exceptions, see [5–8]). In pushing these informal

food alternatives to the forefront of current debates, we adopt J. K. Gibson-Graham's [9] approach of reading for difference and respond to her call to bring new worlds into being by making visible the range of existing "diverse economies". In this endeavor, we also build on recent calls about the need to learn about agro-food alternatives from the European East [10,11] and the invitation to "create alternative development pathways for Alternative Food Networks that are not built on Western models" [12] (p. 14).

Indeed, Eastern Europe harbors a wide array of FSP-related practices. Apart from small-scale home gardening, which is wide-spread throughout the region, related practices take the form of "subsistence farming" in Romania and "people's farming" in Ukraine [13] (p. 63), "quiet food sovereignty" in Russia [13] (p. 513), as well as "peasant farming" aimed at meeting family food needs [14] and sharing food in exchange networks [15] in Moldova. Despite the diversity in scale and terminology, these practices share some key characteristics. Most importantly, the food is produced primarily for the households' own consumption, with the commercial aspect being secondary, if present at all (in Moldova, for example, peasant farming is a minor source of income for the majority of growers [14]). Empirically, this article is based on the study of Czech FSP, which predominantly takes the form of home gardening and in which commercial considerations are virtually absent [16]. Despite the profound economic and cultural diversity of East European countries, this form of FSP, which co-exists with other FSP variants mentioned above, is what the region's societies have in common [17–19].

Traditional practices of food production and consumption, and the ethical behaviors associated with them, have been displaced in terms of the focus of scholarly attention by modern, scientifically reasoned, and market-based methods and strategies: "Structural erasures and revisions of histories, cultures, and ecologies have severed or damaged ties between people and their knowledge embedded in territories" [20] (p. 8). However, traditional practices, knowledge, and ethics, while marginalized, have been stubbornly maintained and often adapted to changing conditions in places and by social groups with access to land. With growing recognition that the project of modernity has come to an impasse [21,22], the long-overlooked practices of local and responsible food production and consumption can become cherished sources of "alternative" approaches, practices, and ethics (spaces of hope, following Harvey [23]). This in turn invites us to think about the need to re-appreciate the traditional (but often adapted) practices of food production, consumption, and care.

Project-based, commercial initiatives have been considered prime examples of the attempts to practice an ethic of care in the sphere of food consumption and production. They represent ethically oriented choices that consumers make as a result of educational campaigns or information about the consequences of their behavior [24–26]. These initiatives include a range of innovations such as box schemes, community-supported agriculture (CSA), coops, and solidarity purchasing groups. Authors such as Diana Mincyte and her colleagues or Lilian Pungas [7,8] have recently extended the scope of exploration of food schemes fostering the ethics of care to include urban non-market, activist initiatives such as community gardening. In this paper, we take a further step in this direction by focusing on FSP as a mundane, inconspicuous, place-based set of food growing and sharing practices. As we show below, the activist, collectively organized, and more overtly political forms of gardening marked by intentionality tend to be marginal phenomena in the wider context of FSP.

In this paper, however, we go even further in claim-making. There is a tendency to consider localized, place-based practices such as FSP as individualized, defensive, powerless, and lacking the capacity for change, at best merely responding to and mitigating the effects of global forces. Following Doreen Massey's [27] geographical reasoning, we suggest a reversal of this perspective. Massey insisted that we should not think of the local as a product of the global. While in much of the literature on food alternatives the agency of the local is understood as either resistance and fightback or building alternatives to global forces, we contend that there is another possibility: places are not always a victim

of redoubts against the global. Places are also agents in globalization. Importantly, this applies not only to places where the global is symbolically anchored, such as Wall Street or the City of London, but also to myriads of less well-known places where everyday lives are struggled through, lived, and enjoyed. Such places do not merely defend the local against the global, but seek to inform and alter the very processes of the global itself.

For the specific configuration of localized food relations at the center of this paper, with its empirical focus on Czech FSP, Massey's ideas about the power of place acquire even greater significance. Parvati Raghuram and colleagues emphasize the importance of questioning the "center from which responsibility and care can be talked about" [28] (p. 5). They suggest that by thinking about responsibility and care along postcolonial lines "any exploration of existing practices of responsibility and care will [ . . . ] reveal the enormous potential of imagining these geographies as forms of existing and evolving relationalities" [28] (p. 5). As part of the 'European East', Czechia is a place that is rarely associated with attempts to generate novel insights and knowledges with the ambition of shaping international debates on the ethics of care and its role in fostering a more hopeful food system. Yet this is precisely what we aim to do.

The paper begins with an overview of the discussions of responsibility, generosity, and care in geography and by linking these debates to responsible food consumption and production. A brief methodological note outlining the approach to data collection and analysis is then provided. This is followed in Section 4 by a brief case study of what is often considered a standard variant of responsible—or sustainable—food consumption using an example of the import of a model of caring in the form of sustainable food consumption facilitated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to Czechia in the mid-2000s. We then use this as a backdrop against which we contrast caring, informal food practices already existing in Czech society. We discuss these informal food practices in detail in Section 5, based on both quantitative and qualitative data, as practices connecting care for the garden with care for loved ones and enjoyment with responsibility. This is followed by a more general discussion of the findings in Section 6 and by the conclusion.

## 2. Generosity, Sharing, and Care in Relation to Food and Place

A growing interest in the concepts of responsibility and care in geography since the mid-2000s [27–31] has been motivated by "their ability to emphasize relationality and interdependence" [28] (p. 5) in the attempts to challenge the trend towards responsabilization of the individual in the realm of public policies. Clive Barnett and David Land [4] critiqued the tendency to equate responsible consumptive behavior with purchasing decisions informed by the acquired knowledge about the causal connection between actions and their consequences. These purchasing decisions are deemed to prevent or mitigate reproduction of environmentally and socially destructive practices. There is an unacknowledged moralism at work in these assumptions. The presumption is that people are naturally inclined to act in egoistical pursuit of their own self-interest unless they are motivated by knowledge and reason to do otherwise [4].

In sustainable consumption and production research, this represents the mainstream and widespread model of responsible consumptive behavior that is often referred to as a "reformist" position. It focuses on consumers choosing to buy eco-efficient products and companies seeking eco-innovations. It is often juxtaposed with a "radical" position—effectively a profound "critique of the mainstream, which advocates the abolishment of capitalism, materialism, and consumerism, and promotes values such as frugality, sufficiency, and localism" [32] (p. 1). These authors also propose a third—and more accommodating—position which they label "reconfiguration". It relies on "transitions in socio-technical systems and daily life practices" [32] (p. 1).

Following Barnett and Land [4] we take issue with the intentionality of the premises of the mainstream, reformist model which—despite being subject to wide criticism in academic circles—remains at the base of much of the practical interventions. This model

of change, popular both in the sphere of public policy and in policy-oriented sustainable consumption studies, is also referred to as the “ABC model” of behavioral change [33]. According to this model, “social change is thought to depend upon values and attitudes (the A), which are believed to drive the kinds of behavior (the B) that individuals choose (the C) to adopt” [33] (p. 1274). This model relies on the intentionality of human behavior, as it assumes “that people need to be shown the consequences of their actions in order to be motivated to change behavior, to take responsibility, to become more caring for the world around them” [4] (p. 1070). The model relies on knowledge as “the prerequisite for various strategies of reconnection” [4] (p. 1068). The centrality of the causal connection between actions and their consequences in this model has a strong geographical dimension. Geography’s educational role is instrumental in revealing how people’s “actions are entangled in spatially and temporally extended networks of unintended consequences” [4] (p. 1067). Crucially and disconcertingly, however, in this understanding, unless exposed to educational efforts of this type, people do not already care and do not act responsibly. They are “trapped within self-interested, privatized worlds of restricted imagination. This restricted imagination is caused by their inhabiting a world of veiled relations that hides from view their real interests and obligations” [6] (p. 111–112).

In the sphere of food, a paramount example of the ABC or reformist model of responsible consumption is Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). As Jonathan Beacham [2] (p. 539) contends, “socio-ecological re-orderings aimed for by AFNs are fundamentally attempts to practice care at differing levels”. The desired, responsible purchasing decisions deemed to be informed by the acquired knowledge about the causal connection between actions and their consequences have initially been associated with care for other humans. These were either more proximate people such as local farmers (as in the case of CSA and box schemes in the Global North) or people who were more geographically distant from Northern consumers such as primary producers in the Global South (e.g., farm workers or farmers on farms certified by Fair Trade or similar certification schemes). As Barnett and Land [4] pointed out, the preoccupation with chains of causality obscures “the degree to which responsible, caring action is motivated not on monological reflection of one’s own obligation, but by encounters with others” [4] (p. 1069). Furthermore, the Other encountered in AFNs is not necessarily exclusively human. In more recent studies, considerations of the Other have extended to more-than-human actors including animals, soils, and plants [2,7,8]. The key point for any caring practice to be defined as such is, therefore, that it “has to be attentive to the needs of the other” [4] (p. 1067).

While Beacham’s [2] research on the ethics of care within AFNs concerned three at least partially commercial AFN schemes in the form of CSA (located in northern England), Mincyte et al. [7] extended the investigation of care in relation to alternative food production to the non-commercial sphere of urban gardening—and hence food producing—projects (located in Vilnius, Lithuania). Because in this paper we seek to expand research on FSP and care beyond the practice of growing to include sharing of food produce with others, we also need to engage with scholarship on sharing and generosity. Central to sharing as an articulation of caring for others is generosity [34]. The concept of generalized reciprocity (participants give without the expectation of receiving back from the same person and without the expectation of receiving back on a specific date), which some scholars equate with the concept of sharing [35], allows us to consider the sharing behavior as caring that includes but transcends narrow circles of friends and families. In her work on seed sharing, Laura Pottinger [5] understands this practice as an articulation of modest, everyday contribution to progressive social and environmental goals and an opportunity for its practitioners to care and practice generosity. Pottinger discovered that seed sharers’ generosity transcended the moment of transaction. Growers were found to give more than expected, and these practices gave participants a lot of pleasure. It relates to seeds they receive, but more importantly, it is derived from growing friendships and feelings of solidarity with a community of gardeners [6].

What these different types of food-related alternatives—CSA, urban gardening initiatives, and seed sharing schemes—have in common is their limited scale, niche character, and geographically sparse presence focused on urban centers. Following Buck's [1] (p. 369) reference to these types of alternatives as "fragments of a beautiful Anthropocene", Beacham [2] (p. 545) cautions against overstating their transformation capacity by describing them as mere "glimpses of potentially positive futures" rather than "as sufficient replacements for wider social, political, and economic change". The recognition of this limitation is an important point for the development of this paper's argument. We argue for the need to take seriously, in contemplating the possibility of a better food system, already existing alternatives—such as FSP—that are neither fragments nor glimpses of positive futures, but widespread and well-established socially embedded practices with rich pasts and presents.

Equally important for this paper's claims is Mincyte et al.'s [7] distinction between two forms of urban gardening and the care claims that are associated with them. One is a globalized, human-centered, post-productivist form of urban gardening based on communality and focused on self-realization and freedom from kinship-based obligations. This form has attracted increasing attention from researchers, activists, and planners [36]. The other is more traditional, individualized gardening as a caring practice embedded in kinship-based commitments and focused on care for plants and food productivism. This form commands considerably less attention within both scholarly and activist circles. In this paper, we are concerned with this latter variant of FSP practiced in home gardens, second home gardens, and on allotment sites in East European countries where FSP is geographically widespread and socially embedded in both rural and urban places. FSP is still marginalized and constantly under pressure from developers and city planners and from proponents of market-based rural development projects. It serves as a significant source of alimentation, more effective than modern agriculture when ecological footprint per unit of production is considered [37]. Furthermore, our research reveals gardens as places of joy and conviviality where caring and socially and environmentally responsible practices are maintained.

The strong presence, geographical diversity, and social embeddedness of East European FSP in multiple places allows us to think of this set of localized food relationships deploying Massey's ideas on the power of place. Rather than considering localized traditional food practices as powerless and lacking capacity for change, as much of academic literature tends to do, we propose to inverse this perspective. We can view these localized informal food practices as an opportunity to start rethinking the processes that constitute the global food system through the concept of everyday care. We develop this argument in Sections 4 and 5, but prior to that, in the next section, we briefly introduce our approach to data collection and analysis that underpins that argument.

### 3. Materials and Methods

Empirically, the article draws on both quantitative and qualitative data sources. The quantitative data have been gathered in two large surveys. Survey 1 was conducted on a representative sample of the Czech population in March 2020, using a CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) method of questioning. The survey sample ( $n=1047$ ) was representative of the general Czech population in terms of gender, age, education category, settlement size, and region of residence. Survey 2 was conducted in Czechia in April 2020 ( $n=1037$ ). Only respondents with access to land suitable for growing plants, irrespective of its size and type of ownership, were selected for this survey. People both using and not using their plot for food production were included. Professional farmers, who comprise 2% of the country's working population, were excluded from the survey. A CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) method of questioning was used in this survey. The combination of the two surveys allowed for ascertaining the extent of FSP in the general population (Survey 1) and at the same time learning more details about the practices, motivations, behavior, or social composition of FSP practitioners (Survey 2).



The findings from the two surveys are complemented with information from qualitative data obtained through an in-depth study of 27 households involved in FSP in Brno, Czechia's second most populous city (380,000 inhabitants). The qualitative research, conducted in four waves of data collection throughout 2018, used semi-structured interviews together with food logs. Research participants used food logs (small paper notebooks) for four months spread out throughout all four seasons of the year to record all fruits, vegetables, and potatoes that their households acquired (from all sources) along with corresponding data concerning amounts, sources, and usage. As such, they provide a detailed picture of the 27 research participants' food practices. In order to prevent participant drop-out and assure data quality, respondents received a compensation of 1000 CZK (approx. 40 EUR) after completing the four full rounds of data collection. We also maintained regular contact and involved participants in ongoing interpretation of the results in order to foster their engagement.

During semi-structured interviews, the meanings and motivations that respondents associated with these practices were discussed. Interviews involved four main themes, namely (1) gardens and gardening (size and location of the plots, frequency and length of visits, growing conditions, decisions about crop compositions), (2) household and eating habits (household size and composition, meal organization, dietary preferences, storing and preserving), (3) sources of food (overview of food sources, decisions about food sources, organization of food provisioning), and (4) gifting and sharing, addressing both receiving and giving food.

The research sample included respondents who grow some of their food in home gardens or on allotment plots, in second home gardens, and in a community garden. While respondents were selected with the aim of covering the most diverse demographics possible, the research sample was not representative of the local population or of Czech gardeners.

The two data sets were first analyzed independently. The survey data were analyzed by the SPSS statistical package using contingency tables with the Pearson Chi-square test employed to assess the significance of differences between subgroups defined in the tables. In the qualitative study, interviews were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding in Atlas.ti. Deductive codes followed the topics and structure of the interview questions mentioned above, and inductive codes were used for additional topics brought up by the research participants. Furthermore, data from the food logs were systematized using Microsoft Excel contingency tables in order to reveal the amounts and types of food related to diverse food sources. In what follows, we combine the quantitative and qualitative data: while the survey results point to general trends, insights from the qualitative research enable a deeper reflection on gardeners' practices.

We decided to combine quantitative and qualitative methods in our research design in order to address the limitations of both methodologies and enhance the overall robustness of our results. The strength of the survey data lies in its representativeness and relatively easy replicability (given adequate time and resources). This notwithstanding, a common weakness of quantitative surveys is the limited explanatory depth and nuance. In our research, this limitation is compensated for by the qualitative survey, which has a limited validity but provides deeper insights particularly into respondents' motivations and values. Although both studies were conducted separately, regular contact between the researchers ensured cross-fertilization and coordination of the research, allowing us to use the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Before discussing our findings concerning the everyday ethicality and caring of FSP practices in Section 5, in the next section, we briefly introduce an example of the conventional model of caring behavior in the form of sustainable consumption that was imported to Czechia by international agencies in the mid-2000s. It serves as a comparator to help us to draw out the main tenets of the FSP-related caring behavior.

#### 4. Import of the Globalized Consumption-Related Ethic of Care

Perhaps somewhat curiously, it is possible to put precise dates (29–30 May 2003) to the arrival of the concept of “sustainable consumption” to Czechia. At that point, a host of practices and policies compliant with the notion of sustainable consumption had been established in the country: see, e.g., Jan Keller’s [38] early critique of consumerism and Hana Librová’s [39] study of local pioneers of voluntary simplicity. Nonetheless, the seminar titled “Sustainable Consumption Opportunities for Europe” (SCOPE) and held in Prague on those two days was hugely significant, as it ushered into the country what came to be—certainly in the sphere of public policy—the hegemonic model of sustainable consumption. Prague was, in fact, one of several stops of this itinerant seminar organized by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and deployed primarily in the East European region. The seminar run by the UNEP’s Regional Office for Europe was an offshoot of a wider international initiative with its institutional roots in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg. Sustainable consumption and production became one of its three main objectives.

In the specific East European contexts at the time, this policy transfer was a part of the more general process of the preparation of these countries for the forthcoming membership in the European Union. It primarily aimed at equipping “Central and East European environmental groups with new points of leverage, thus enhancing their political opportunity structures, in combination with media and educational campaigns aimed at affecting citizens’ beliefs and perceptions” [40]. This mainly concerned two of the four types of sustainable consumption promoted by the seminar: “conscious (or ethical) consumption” and “different consumption”. The other two types were “efficient consumption” (in practice meaning dematerialization initiatives driven by industries and government and aimed at radically reducing the amounts of resources used per unit of consumption) and “appropriate consumption”, which epitomized future-oriented society-wide discussions about appropriate levels of consumption in relation to quality of life. In practice, “different consumption” meant the promotion of environmentally more sensitive consumption via green procurement schemes advocated by public authorities and citizen groups. “Conscious (or ethical) consumption” was a shift towards less environmentally damaging consumption patterns via consumers’ choices informed by educational campaigns about environmental (and social) effects of consumption. In environmental activist circles, this quickly established itself as a hegemonic model of sustainable consumption. Environmental campaigners began promoting market-based certification schemes that relied on citizens’ ethically motivated consumptive choices:

*When somebody says “sustainable consumption”, to me that means responsible consumption and that is informed consumption. In short, when I make a decision as a consumer, I make that decision on the basis of information. If I make that decision only on the basis of the information that I want to buy something or that I am hungry, it does not imply a terribly responsible consumption. But if I want to make a decision in a way that is responsible and sustainable, I need to obtain further information. Usually, this information is available on the product; there is either an ecolabel such a “organic product” or a label that indicates provenance . . . and this relates to an important condition—that I can understand the information on the product.*

(Male participant in the SCOPE seminar, 2004)

The magnitude of the impact of the ideas promoted by the SCOPE seminar is evidenced by the change of coverage of food consumption topics in the leading Czech environmentalist magazine *Sedmá generace* (the name, Seventh Generation, alludes to the environmental and moral appeal known as the Great Law of the Iroquois, which urges humans to consider the impacts of their actions on the seven generations to come). Informal food practices in households—growing, foraging, and sharing—dominated the coverage on food consumption from the launch of the magazine in 1991 until 2000. The first articles about food certification began to appear in the early 2000s, but shortly after

the SCOPE seminar in 2004 ethical and market- and certification-based food consumption initiatives such as organic and Fair Trade food completely replaced informal food practices. Market-based sustainable consumption initiatives became the hegemonic form of narrative about the ways of transforming the food system in the magazine's pages [41] and in environmentalist circles.

While the magazine's coverage was not systematically analyzed after 2010, a brief examination of recent issues, complemented by the insights of one of this paper's co-authors gained during her membership on the editorial board, suggests a slight change in this trend. Since the mid-2010s, the magazine's coverage has continued to echo key debates and trends relevant to sustainable consumption, such as reporting on the environmentally problematic production of palm oil or promoting zero waste. However, the magazine has also revisited FSP practices (absent from the magazine for about a decade) by reporting on newly emerging urban community gardens in Czechia, while also giving space to traditional forms of self-sufficiency, featuring for instance a series written by an author leading a neo-peasant lifestyle in rural Slovakia. During the preparation of this article's manuscript, we learned that *Sedmá generace* planned to dedicate a special issue to urban gardening.

The import of sustainable consumption governance in Eastern Europe thus had problematic consequences. While it was a source of policy innovation concerning sustainable food consumption, it also laid the ground for the hegemonic discourse on sustainable consumption. This discourse promoted an insignificant form of sustainable consumption while temporarily discounting the well-established everyday food practices in which a large proportion of the population was involved and produced considerable volumes of food [42]. These developments are strikingly reminiscent of processes documented in other East European countries during their accession to the EU, e.g., the marginalization of Lithuanian small-scale subsistence farming with low environmental impacts as a threat to adopting a modern (i.e., EU) model of sustainable farming [43] or the stigmatization of the traditional, localized, and socially embedded sales of home-made foods in Latvia justified by (the interpretations of) EU hygiene regulations [44].

Based on one of the co-author's insider knowledge of the Czech environmental movement, individualized, market-based consumption has remained the main focus of recent activist campaigns aimed at food and agriculture. The continuing centrality of the informed and conscious consumer is epitomized by the campaign "Art of choosing" by the Brno-based Ecological Institute Veronica (an environmental advisory, publishing, and educational institution, formally a local branch of the Czech Union of Nature Conservationists). A publication of the same title provides a consumer guide through diverse certification schemes and sources of information on consumer goods. In a similar logic of informing and sensitizing the public, the food campaign of *Hnutí Duha*, the Czech branch of Friends of the Earth and one of the most prominent Czech NGOs, promotes local and organic consumption through a map of ecological farms. Consumption of organic food and support of farmers' markets are also the focus of *PROBIO-Liga*, a branch of the Association of Organic Farmers, while the Ecumenical Academy advocates for Fair Trade as a means to promote global solidarity. The Association of Local Food Initiatives promotes CSA schemes and works on awareness raising and the education of both consumers and farmers. New topics introduced in debates around food provisioning include land stewardship and access, addressed by the Foundation for Soil or CoolAND, as well as a more political dimension put forward by the Czech Food Sovereignty Forum. As this anecdotal evidence shows, the debates on food and agriculture remain vibrant in the Czech context. However, with the exception of a few advocates of convivial lifestyle, they largely omit traditional and "quiet" [16] food practices such as FSP, foraging, preserve making, or informal food sharing, which are addressed in the next section.

##### **5. "The Most Perfect Experience": Food Self-Provisioning as a Way of Caring for Soil, Plants, and Fellow Humans**

FSP is a common practice in Czechia. Just over forty percent (41.5%) of Czech households declared in Survey 1 that they grow some of the food consumed in their households



in their gardens or similar plots. All but a few such plots can be considered “traditional” FSP gardens that are located, in most cases, by the gardeners’ houses or on allotment sites and also, in some cases, by their weekend cottages. Only 0.7% of food growing households (Survey 2) have their plots located in a community garden or a similar public space, which can be considered the novel, activist, project-oriented type of gardening that has recently attracted much academic attention [7,45]. Survey 2 confirmed that gardening in Czechia is not predominantly a coping strategy of the poor or an elitist activity of the upper classes. The social structure of FSP households is very similar to that of the general population, and the same applies to income and educational structures, as was already demonstrated by previous research [46].

Practicing a hobby has consistently been mentioned as one of the key motivations (after fresh and healthy food) for engaging in FSP in recent Czech surveys (Survey 2; [46,47]), and this motivation is also consistent with findings from other European contexts [48,49]. Our qualitative data provide more nuanced insight into the deeper meanings of this practice of FSP as leisure, related to senses of both self-fulfillment and responsibility. Many respondents practice FSP with tenacity and dedication. They spend a significant amount of time at their plots, develop sophisticated cropping schemes, and enjoy discovering new growing methods. They experiment with different plant varieties and seek to improve their gardening skills. FSP is part of their identity and a significant influence in the temporal ordering of daily life. This is reflected by words like “experience” or “lifestyle” some gardeners used when referring to their FSP practice. Consider the following answers to the question “Why do you grow food?”:

*First of all, having fresh vegetables is an unmatched, unbeatable experience. The second thing is to show our grandchildren what can be done in the garden, or how you actually get fruit.*

(Man, 70s, growing food in a home garden)

*It is the most perfect experience, eating what we got from the garden or what someone gave us from their garden. It’s a euphoric feeling that this is the way it’s supposed to be, that this is right, some idea that we are still somehow connected to the land.*

(Woman, 30s, growing food in a second home garden)

These quotations show that the enjoyment of FSP exceeds a simple understanding of a hobby as a pleasant way of spending time. They also point to the most important motivation mentioned consistently in surveys: obtaining fresh and healthy food (the first motivation for 56% of gardeners in Survey 2). While in all cases FSP is a leisure, non-market activity, the volume of production is not negligible. Thirty-six per cent of household consumption of vegetables, 28% of potatoes and 34% of fruit is accounted for by domestic production or gifts from other FSP households (Survey 2). These data are consistent with the food sources represented in the food logs used in the qualitative study, and they reveal FSP as an important part of a diverse economy in Gibson-Graham’s [50] post-capitalist vocabulary.

In our qualitative research, home-grown food was seen as having the best qualities in terms of taste, freshness, and transparency of origin. These understandings of “good food” also harbor an inherent moral dimension, as is apparent in the quotation above: home-grown food is perceived as an indicator of “what is right”. Unpacking this moral dimension, the analysis of qualitative data identified two key responsibilities combined in the practice of FSP: caring for gardens and caring for loved ones. First, the respondents’ implicit environmental concerns were apparent in their justification of their reluctance to use agrochemicals by the desire to maintain health qualities of the food they produced. Second, FSP was more or less explicitly understood as part of caring for respondents’ families and extended networks of kin and friends. As a reason for practicing FSP, several respondents mentioned the desire to provide fresh food for their children or grandchildren. Others saw the garden as a means to make their households’ diets healthier through an increased consumption of easily accessible vegetables. Furthermore, gardeners enjoyed

sharing their harvest, a practice driven by generosity, generalized reciprocity, and the wish to foster social relations. While the two caring modalities cannot be separated, the following text addresses each of them in separate subsections for the sake of clarity.

### 5.1. Caring for the Garden

The overwhelming majority of gardeners are not environmental activists. We asked Survey 2 respondents to choose three out of nine possible answers to the question “What reasons do people have for growing their own food?”. In the resulting ranking of the reasons for practicing FSP, environmental motivations appeared to be the least important, being mentioned as the first reason by just 4% of gardeners. However, despite being “quiet” in the sense of non-activist and not openly political [16], in the way it is actually performed FSP is a profoundly caring practice, as manifested particularly in soil cultivation methods and organic waste management.

Compared to modern industrial agriculture and horticulture, which is practically impossible without the use of chemical fertilizers, Czech FSP relies on industrially produced inputs to a much lesser extent. Only 38% of the interviewed population of 1037 gardeners (Survey 2) admitted to using industrial fertilizers, the majority of them in combination with natural fertilizers such as manure (Table 1). One-half of the gardeners use natural fertilizers only, and another 12% do not apply any fertilizers. We have no exact data on yields per square unit of the garden, but considering the very small acreage of the plots (the median size is 400 m<sup>2</sup>) and considerable volumes of production (Survey 2) we can assume that productivity is not significantly smaller than in commercial horticulture. Even though it is motivated mostly by the quality of food and not by environmental concerns, FSP has a significantly positive ecological impact as a source of local and (nearly) organic food.

**Table 1.** Percentage of fertilizer use in three age cohorts.

Way of Fertilizing	Age Cohort			Total
	18–34 Years	35–54 Years	55+ Years	
No fertilizers	14.6	16.2	7.1	12.2
Natural fertilizers only	53.8	50.3	44.9	49.4
Both natural and industrial	28.9	31.5	43.4	35.2
Industrial fertilizers only	2.7	1.9	4.6	3.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey 2.

At the same time, precisely because gardeners’ main motivation is food quality and quantity and not environmental concerns, most of them do not oppose chemical fertilizers in principle (Survey 2). Those of them who use fertilizers apply them on the basis of their knowledge of the local context and needs. Comparing garden fertilization methods in three age groups of gardeners (Table 1) reveals a tendency toward a lower use of industrial fertilizers by younger gardeners compared to older ones. Clearly, for the younger age cohort, gardening is not a practice geared towards maximum yields but rather a way of looking for a place-specific balancing act between caring for the quality of produce and the long-term sustainability of the plot.

The data on pesticide use reveal a similar pattern: one-half of all gardeners use only natural means of plant disease and pest control, while 26% use both natural methods and industrial pesticides and 18% use no pesticides (Survey 2, see Table 2). We interpret these figures as signs of hope for a better Anthropocene, considering that gardeners’ demand for agrochemicals remains low despite the easy availability of these products in the market and that younger gardeners seem to limit the use of industrial inputs even further.

**Table 2.** Percentage of pesticides usage in three age cohorts.

Way of Pest Control	Age Cohort			Total
	18–34 Years	35–54 Years	55+ Years	
No pesticides	15.5	18.5	12.2	15.1
Natural methods only	39.8	39.5	38.8	39.3
Both natural and industrial	41.0	38.2	45.4	41.9
Industrial pesticides only	3.6	3.8	3.6	3.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey 2.

The findings from the qualitative research confirm and offer a deeper understanding of the observed patterns. The aversion to agrochemicals was a common attitude, and gardeners mentioned a number of strategies they adopt to avoid the use of industrial pesticides and fertilizers on their plots. These strategies include intensification of manual labor and experimenting with different gardening methods and with natural remedies. Some respondents used agrochemicals occasionally for specific crops or in particular situations of pest infestation. In these cases, such treatments were described as a last resort and a necessary evil. Others preferred to stop growing crops that were susceptible to pests, or otherwise unsuitable to local conditions rather than resorting to the use of industrially made pesticides or using large quantities of resources such as water:

*I don't grow cabbage because the cabbage whites would eat it, and I don't want to spray it.*

(Woman, 60s, growing food in an allotment)

*One problem [ . . . ] is that it's terribly dry, sometimes to the extent that I divide it into two seasons, spring and autumn. In summer the plot parches. There is a water tap for watering, but you can't water it enough; it just wouldn't be profitable, economically or ecologically. You would have to go there every day and pour gallons of water on it.*

(Woman, 30s, growing food in an allotment)

Similarly to the observations of Mincyte et al. [7] in Lithuania, particularly more experienced gardeners in our qualitative study were well attuned to the growing conditions of their plots and to the diverse needs of individual crops. This knowledge informed a caring ethic of respect and stewardship. Gardens were seen as places of interaction with the natural environment and sources of “non-chemical” food. As the younger woman quoted above further reflected, environmental considerations were in fact enabled by the special status of FSP as both food provisioning and a leisure practice:

*I didn't spray [my garden] even when the cabbage whites were eating my Savoy cabbage. Let them eat it. But that's really because I see it very much as a hobby; it's not like I'm a farmer who needs to sell it somewhere.*

(Woman, 30s, growing food in an allotment)

The results of Survey 2 suggest that food growing households also behave responsibly in dealing with waste, both from the garden and from the kitchen. Most organic waste from the garden is recycled locally as compost or, in a few cases, as feed for animals. Only 27% of waste from the Czech gardens leaves the garden, mostly in organic waste containers provided by local authorities (Table 3). Gardening also contributes significantly to the diminishing of the volume of organic kitchen waste: 55% of such waste is utilized on the household's premises and does not enter communal waste management systems.

**Table 3.** Management types of garden waste and organic waste from kitchen (the values indicate the share of different ways of disposal on the total volume of waste in FSP households).

Way of Waste Management	Garden Waste [%]	Organic Waste from Kitchen [%]
Compost	63.6	36.5
Feedstuff	8.9	18.8
Bio-container	18.1	15.0
Communal waste	5.3	29.6
Burning	4.1	X
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey 2.

### 5.2. Caring for Loved Ones

As mentioned, caring for gardens and caring for loved ones were seen as interrelated. The following quote from our qualitative study reveals how a respondent's close relation to the garden shapes the practical negotiations of caring about her grandson:

*The little one walks around, picks something and eats it right away. I don't care about washing it. It's in the garden, eat it with the soil and with the worms, I don't mind, because I know it's healthy. So that's my approach. That's how I grew up, so I'm not concerned with whether it's washed or not.*

(Woman, 60s, growing food in an allotment)

This brings us to the second dimension of care that relates to the social norms and values associated with FSP. While gardening was perceived as enjoyment—and not a necessity—by all respondents of the qualitative study, there is an inherent tension resulting from the double role of FSP as both a hobby and a caring activity guided by a moral sense of responsibility. As noted in previous works [7,51], care for plants and food production creates a commitment that can turn what was originally a hobby into a time- and labor-intensive obligation. Participants in the qualitative study mostly described this pressure in relation to processing the abundant produce in times of peak harvest:

*You bring it home, and you're standing at the stove till midnight. I return from the garden, and I start a second shift at home.*

(Woman, 60s, growing food in an allotment)

*I would like to have more time for processing—that is probably the most demanding part of the entire process. Planting, caring for it, harvesting, that's fine. But then I come to Brno (from my second-home garden) on Sunday evening, and the flat is full of it, and I know that I can't store it and I would need two more days just to put the tomatoes in the freezer. One year we were really bringing them 20 kilos at a time. We made a huge amount of lecsó (an originally Hungarian vegetable stew made with yellow peppers, tomatoes, onion and salt), and we were so happy in the winter. It was really great.*

(Woman, 30s, growing food in a second home garden)

Other authors have argued that the time and labor demands of FSP create burdens that are often distributed unequally in terms of gender and age [52]. Such critical readings are important to prevent an overly romanticized perspective of FSP—a discussion that is also relevant in broader literature on AFNs (see, e.g., [53,54]). In this paper, however, we also see such tensions as confirming the nature of FSP as a caring practice that entails both altruism and conviviality, as well as responsibility and commitment. Furthermore, we argue that they reflect practitioners' appreciation of home-grown food, as is illustrated in the last quote above.

Sharing food within broad social networks is another way in which gardeners find a use for surplus produce. By giving away or sharing some part of their harvest, gardeners contribute to strengthening or establishing social ties, thus caring also for the wider community of which they are members. The qualitative interviews revealed a diversity

of situations in which home-grown food is shared. At times, the harvest can be such that households cannot cope with it and invite friends or neighbors to pick fruits or offer it as a gift. At other times the harvest, may not be so plentiful, but gardeners, being proud of their (uncertified) organic vegetables or fruits, want to show their achievements by giving away some part of produce. In still other cases, gardeners give away some produce purposefully to invigorate social ties with friends. Shared carrots, apples, or pickles thus become actants attaining the power to foster community. The practice of sharing combines sentiments of care for both the gardens (i.e., using the produce well) and other people (i.e., providing loved ones with good food), which were combined in different ways for different gardeners:

*(We grow so many carrots) because some of our children still have little children, so for them to have non-chemical carrots.*

(Man, 70s, growing food in a home garden)

*With respect to food growing I have to say that I like planting and growing, but when I'm supposed to harvest and preserve and process, then I prefer to give it away.*

(Woman, 30s, growing food in an allotment)

Survey 2 indicates that most gardeners share some part of their produce (Table 4). Only 11% of food-growing households do not share their produce with others. More than 1/10 of produce is given away by 48% of Czech households that grow food. Young and older-age households tend to share more compared to middle-age households, but the differences between age groups are relatively small. The percentage of shared produce slightly increases with education level.

**Table 4.** Extent of food sharing as a percentage of total produce.

Extent of Sharing	Percentage [%] of Food Growing Households
No sharing	11.2
Sharing less than 1/10	41.1
Sharing between 1/10 and 1/4	36.0
Sharing between 1/4 and 1/2	11.2
Sharing more than 1/2	0.5
Total	100.0

Note: Only participants who grow some food in their gardens are included in this table;  $n = 912$ . Source: Survey 2.

While it may be nice to give away half of one's harvest, the material impact of such sharing would be close to zero if the total harvest is two apples. To assess the material impact of food sharing, we combined the Survey 2 data on the extent of sharing with data on the volume of produce. We constructed a fictitious figure of a "generous gardener" as a person from a food growing household whose domestic production meets 26% or more of the household consumption of vegetables, fruits, or potatoes, and, at the same time, 1/10 or more of this produce is shared with others (Table 5). The results indicate that "generous gardeners" form the most numerous subgroup, or that those who grow more, relative to their domestic consumption, also tend to give away a higher percentage of their produce. Thus, caring for healthy and fresh food is closely and positively connected to caring for social relations.

What drives people to grow food and then to give it away to demonstrate generosity? To shed some light on this question, we compared Survey 2 answers of generous gardeners ( $n = 314$ , see Table 5) with those of the "less generous" ones, or those who still grow more than 25% of their household consumption of vegetables and fruits but share no more than 1/10 of it ( $n = 267$ ). We used a t-test to ascertain whether the differences between groups are statistically significant. We found no differences between "more generous" and "less generous" gardeners in terms of the location of gardens (home, allotment, cottage, elsewhere), types of fertilizer or pesticide use, household type and size, occupation, or living standards. However, generous gardeners are of both older and young age, while



middle-aged gardeners are less generous. Generosity also correlates positively with the level of education. Generous gardeners have more extensive social networks. In response to a direct question (“what are your reasons for giving away the food you produce?”), the generous gardeners gave more often general ethical reasons such as happiness or good feeling. The less generous gardeners gave utilitarian reasons slightly more often, such as “to show results of my labor” or to “keep good relations with neighbors”. Significantly, the generous gardeners, compared to the less generous ones, were more often engaged in informal mutual help networks, offering help such as babysitting, shop deliveries, caring for the elderly or the ill, or helping with household chores or work in the garden (Survey 2). This correlation confirms the alignment of FSP with other practices of care.

**Table 5.** Number of gardeners classified on the basis of relative volume of produce and extent of sharing.

Extent of Sharing	Growing Up to 25% of Consumption	Growing 26% of Consumption or More	Total
None or less than 1/10	210	267	477
Sharing 1/10 or more	121	314 (“Generous gardeners”)	435
Total	331	581	912

Note: Only participants who grow some food in their gardens are included in this table;  $n = 912$ . Source: Survey 2.

## 6. Discussion

Drawing on the Czech case the article provides evidence that non-activist FSP is a widespread, socially embedded, diverse, and non-exclusive set of everyday practices. Similar findings have recently been made in other East European countries, including Poland [48], Hungary [55], Estonia [56], and Croatia [57]. FSP also tends to be a highly productive practice that generates significant volumes of fruit and vegetables outside the conventional food system and the market economy. While not driven, in the overwhelming majority of cases, by explicit political agendas and activist objectives, it is imbued with deeper meanings that transcend both straightforward productivist motivations and the simple desire for enjoyment in the form of a hobby. The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research point fundamentally in the same direction. The most attractive aspect of practicing FSP is its capacity to express care for Others—both human and non-human.

The caring dimension of FSP in relation to fellow humans is articulated by the importance ascribed to the production of healthy fruit and vegetables. The desire to produce healthy food in many cases translates into the adoption of caring methods of cultivation that “benefit the regenerative ecological processes such as nutrient cycle in the soil” [8] and the wider garden ecosystem including insects and plants. Healthy and fresh food is produced for members of growers’ immediate families, but also for more distant relatives and friends, neighbors, and work colleagues. Home-grown food is distributed within far-reaching networks in interactions often eschewing reciprocity and which, therefore, also include many recipients who do not grow food themselves. These interactions are a manifestation of what Belk [35] refers to as generalized reciprocity. Barnett and Land [4], following Diprose [58], call this corporeal generosity, which is embedded in relationships of responsiveness and attentiveness to others. This largely non-reciprocal sharing can be understood as a practice that is constitutive of sociality, community, and togetherness. In other words, practice through which “people ordinarily act in concert to sustain relationships over time and space” [4] (p. 1073), always undertaken in the company of others. Importantly, these acts of care do not result from conscious or politically driven deliberations, but rather from implicit and taken-for-granted moralities (see also [59]).

## 7. Conclusions

The findings outlined in the previous section support the first major claim concerning our research’s contribution to knowledge about FSP as a form of care. By combining the results of analyses of data from large-scale surveys with those from in-depth interviews,

we have produced a robust set of insights concerning the scale (in terms of the number of people involved) and material significance (in terms of volumes of food produced) of these caring practices. In this sense, our research is an important complement to recent studies based on qualitative, localized micro-studies of a dozen or so respondents [7,8].

The second major claim relates to contesting the implicit association of care in FSP practices with *political food activism* primarily in *urban* settings. We recognize the role of activist *urban* gardening/farming initiatives in the dissemination of gardening practices within demographic groups that are not typically involved in these practices. However, we wish to highlight the importance of non-activist FSP practiced in *both urban and rural* settings. Our contention is that the absence of political activism in mundane and inconspicuous forms of FSP does not mean that these practices are devoid of an ethical dimension. In contrast, we claim that studying FSP through the lens of an ethic of care holds a promise of novel and important insights for the quest to re-think and transform the wider food system along environmentally and socially more beneficial lines.

This novel re-conceptualization of widespread, everyday FSP in Czechia, and in Eastern Europe more generally, as an important form of care suggests a possibility of the reversal of its negative valorization vis-à-vis both activist, non-market forms of FSP such as urban/community gardening projects and market-based initiatives in the sphere of ethical food consumption. The latter is often perceived as a hegemonic, global model of care in the sphere of food production and consumption. While we recognize the potential of the imported model of market-based sustainable consumption to diversify the range of opportunities for citizens to engage in caring behavior, we have also shown its unintended effects of discursively displacing the forms of non-market behaviors associated with care for the garden and other humans.

As we have also shown, using the top-down initiative SCOPE as an example of the globalized, hegemonic form of caring behavior, there are places (Czechia and, by extension, Eastern Europe as just one of them) where the supposedly dominant, “global” model of marketized care is likely to be relatively less significant than the “local”, non-market, and everyday form of care. By “less significant”, we mean the involvement of fewer people and materially lower volumes of food. Consequently, and following Massey’s [27] (p. 11) invitation to think of localized, place-based practices as the moments through which “the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced”, we put forward a novel conceptualization of FSP. We suggest its reframing from hopeless, defensive, powerless, and capacity-for-change-lacking practices into a hopeful vision that is compelling enough to provoke profound change. Viewing Eastern Europe as a place from which such visions emanate requires a leap of imagination. It demands acceptance of the possibility of repositioning this place in the global flows of knowledge and know-how from a recipient (this is how proponents of the globalizing SCOPE initiative saw it in the early 2000s) to a producer of what constitutes—or even exceeds—“fragments of a beautiful Anthropocene”.

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