

Unnoticed, yet happening: food foraging in the city



Foraging refers to the collection of plants and fungal materials (such as berries or mushrooms) in places of the city that are not deliberately dedicated to growing food. Not much is known about this activity, the people who practice it, and its relevance for urban food security.

A team of researchers across a variety of Baltimore-based organisations carried out an exhaustive survey to identify what, why, and, for the first time, how much people foraged in the city. This study puts this activity on the radar of urban planners and raises questions regarding the health and sustainability risks and benefits of foraging.

Who forages and why?

Previous studies about foraging showed that there is a variety of reasons to collect food from the city, depending on the context. For migrants to the city, foraging can be a way to access food that is culturally relevant yet not available or of poor quality in the nearby outlets. Foraging also played a role in diet diversity for population under siege in Sarajevo in the 1990's.

In more peaceful times, reasons vary greatly. **In Baltimore, all the foragers in the study quoted enjoyment and leisure as their primary reason.** Economic benefits are also present, with the greatest volume of food collected by respondents with the lowest income. The survey did not investigate why, but a hypothesis can be that these households have a limited budget for food provisioning, hence complementing what they buy with that they forage. Household with the highest levels of income were the second most active group. Here, an hypothesis is that they have more leisure time to go and collect food. Indeed, lack of time is quoted by 59% of respondents as the main barrier to foraging.

In Baltimore, foragers who answered the survey tended to be more white and educated, with 78% holding a bachelor degree. This result cannot be extrapolated to the whole of Baltimore's population or foragers in general, as the survey sample was not representative of the city's residents. The picture is that of a core group of foragers, and people who do it occasionally: indeed, the majority of respondents stated that they had done so for less than 5 years. There is a strong community aspect to this activity, with information on what to forage and where mainly coming from friends, other foragers and the Internet.

Why do they forage? To supplement their diet. **The average contribution of foraging to food intake is 7%. For some, however, it can be as high 47%.**

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What do people forage and where?

Looking more precisely at what people pick from the city, respondents quoted over 170 different types of species (or species complexes, i.e. groups of closely related species)! As far as diversity is concerned, a wide array of plants were cited by respondents, including fruits, nuts, berries and leaves. **Fungi represents 75% of the overall volume.**

Collecting food happens in a variety of places, and not only in parks. In Baltimore, 62% of the volume comes from green spaces: parks, but also golf courses, deciduous forests or recreational areas. 24% happens in residential areas. A [previous study](#) showed that cemeteries or alleyways were great places to find dandelions, and ornamental planting around buildings, interesting for berries.

What surprised the researchers was the extent to which people are willing to travel to forage: an average of 7 km! This suggests how important this activity is for them.

A new topic for policy to deal with?

This study puts foraging on the radar of cities: it actually happens, even if food policy does not usually say anything about it. A good fraction of Baltimore's respondents (around 20%) gets a large portion of their diet from it (10% or more). According to Keeve Nachman, who co-authored the study, it is very important to know the extent to which foraging contributes to diets. **On the one hand, because it contributes to food security, on the other hand, because it raises public health concerns if the food that is collected is contaminated**, for instance if it is exposed to chemicals in the air or in the soil. More should be done in the future to study the actual risks and benefits of foraging in order to develop relevant policies. For instance, the survey respondents in Baltimore tend not to wash, peel or prepare the vegetables they collect in a way that would reduce surface contamination, therefore getting exposed to contaminants on the vegetable skin.

This study also raises the issue of potential over-foraging. Indeed, some of the foragers did not answer the survey questions that related to location on these grounds, even if researchers promised that they would keep foraging locations confidential. More research is needed to fully investigate whether people who collect food in the city tend to be careful, and harvest in such a way that ensures the continued growth of the species, for instance by pruning the plants to encourage them to grow. Moreover, Marla Emery, who co-authored the study, points out that of more frequently foraged species are weeds, that grow easily. It is therefore difficult to imagine sustainability concerns about them. This, however, is definitely a matter to be discussed if foraging is to get noticed by urban food policies.

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Source:

[Colleen M. Synk, Brent F. Kim, Charles A. Davis, James Harding, Virginia Rogers, Patrick T. Hurley, Marla R. Emery, Keeve E. Nachman, \(2017\), "Gathering Baltimore's bounty: Characterizing behaviors, motivations, and barriers of foragers in an urban ecosystem", Urban Forestry & Urban Greening, Vol. 28, pp. 97-102](#)

For an open source article on foraging, see also:

[Rebecca J. McLain, Patrick T. Hurley, Marla R. Emery & Melissa R. Poe \(2013\) "Gathering "wild" food in the city: rethinking the role of foraging in urban ecosystem planning and management", Local Environment, Vol. 19:2, pp. 220-240](#)

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