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CULTIVATING A SENSE OF PLACE

No place is to be learned like a textbook or a course in a school, and then turned away from forever on the assumption that one's knowledge is complete. What is to be known about it is without limit, and it is endlessly changing. Knowing it is therefore like breathing: it can happen, it stays real, only on the condition that it continues to happen.

(Berry, 1991, p. 75)

It's like I'm a member. I'm home. I'm safe. I'm comfortable.

(Student, Learning Gardens)

In this chapter we ground learning gardens in local school and community contexts, while simultaneously exploring the challenges for education in an era of globalization. Living soil can be a guide in framing place within an ecological context, as soil is composed in place over time and plays a significant role in creation of place, through influencing establishment of plants, land-use patterns, and cultures. Significantly, soil and culture exist in reciprocal relationship: culture contributes as much to soil life, conservation, or degradation as soil conditions contribute to cultural life and diversity of places.

Living Soil and Local Place

Living soil nurtures a vibrant biotic community endemic to place and supports locally adapted plants and food crops. The connection between food and place is often overshadowed in a global food economy, but many of us still find pleasure in food harvested from local soil and even more so when it is grown personally. Something special is carried forward in each bite of food derived from local

soil—we are actually able to taste our place and connection to the biotic community.

The living soil of school learning gardens is necessarily local and bound to the climatic and cultural constitution of place. It is in the terrestrial living soil of learning gardens that the proverbial “seeds of change” germinate, grow, and thrive. Thus soil is a relevant medium for thinking and learning about place in both the literal and the metaphoric sense, as discussed in earlier chapters. Soil provides a unique multifaceted and delicious venue for developing place consciousness. School grounds can be that setting. Food and soil draw our bodily and mental attention at once to the local and ecological relations embedded in each calorie or clod. Producing food for humans, food for pollinators and wildlife, and also food for thought, learning gardens serve as sites of creative re-imagining of possible place-based relationships in the era of globalization.

The infinite variety and uniqueness of places is generated through recursive confluences of biogeography, language, climate, and culture. Observing the variations in climate, flora and fauna, dialects, and food, is how one knows a new region has been entered, and this recognition may inspire both appreciation of difference and reflection upon one’s home region. Travelers often remark upon such differences when arriving in a new area, seeking to contextualize new experience in relation to place. Variation from one community to another reflects the endless potential of human ingenuity in adapting differing conditions to meet common needs such as food, shelter, and meaning. Observing the diversity found in local responses to place can sustain the senses, stimulate awareness, conjure memories, and inspire novel ideas. The uniqueness of place is embodied in the soils of diverse school learning gardens.

Groundedness in Place

Groundedness in place refers to a reciprocal relationship in which one nurtures and is nurtured by the surrounding social and ecological environment. A tree, for example, forms such a reciprocal relationship with place: while it is rooted in specific soil, bounded by contingencies of water, air, sun, space, and so forth, a tree at once contributes to shaping its own environment through shedding water, casting shade, and dropping leaves which then become mulch. Thus the tree and its terrestrial home are intimately linked, each contributing to the life of the other. Education that is grounded in place is likewise motivated by an interest in forming reciprocal relationships with the local environments where students and their families dwell. Students may, for instance, test water quality in local watersheds, serve food to homeless people in their community, participate in farmers’ markets, map endemic flora and fauna, plant native plants to restore degraded natural areas, or monitor urban air quality in the school neighborhood. These activities focus attention on the local particularities of global phenomena. In this way, “place” is informed by interconnections between local relevance in a