

BFI Foodscape Mapping Project – Oral Histories
Category: Campus Gardens

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Transcript of interview conducted with
Susanne Weisman
Berkeley, California
Garden: Clark Kerr Campus Garden

by: NATHALIE MUNOZ

MUNOZ: This is Nathalie with Susanne Weisman on Tuesday March 14, 2017. We are at the Clark Kerr Campus Garden in Berkeley, California. So, can you tell us a little bit about what the Clark Kerr Campus and the garden specifically do?

WEISMAN: The Clark Kerr Garden and grounds are a demonstration garden with the intention to connect people with gardening and growing food and to provide very basic examples of how that can be incorporated into the landscape and into different campus sites. So we have, we actually have a lot of edibles in the landscape in general and our goal is to keep expanding on that and making that more sustainable and solid. Kind of mimicking like maybe an old Spanish style mission, you know there is a whole history around that and this campus has you know like, pretty spectacular architecture and it just really suits this area and we have a really great climate for that. And then our chefs garden is open to the public. It's really accessible. Its location is right next to the dining halls and next to the dormitories so it's just an ideal setup to show that to the community

MUNOZ: So what parts of Clark Kerr do you work on?

WEISMAN: The campus is broken into territories. There's three of us on this site. I do lead the chef's garden and manage that. I also do the upper dining court yards which are pretty spectacular for that as well and then I have, it's hard to explain, but I have various other sections on campus. I could go into- I could map that for you [laughs]. It's pretty spread out.

MUNOZ: So what's growing right now and what happens to that produce?

WEISMAN: As far as the produce goes we always have a supply of fresh herbs and that's kind of been our starting base and something that we'd really like to see replicated around the other dining halls cause they're really basic. Those include hedges of bay we have like a Culinary bay, we have a California bay, we have hedges of pineapple Guavas which are just amazing.

MUNOZ: I've never had one. I've never even heard of them before.

WEISMAN: They are coming very soon. They're actually from New Zealand. I originally thought they were native to California but they are completely adapted here so they're super low maintenance, and they're high producers of delicious and they produce twice a year. We get so much produce off of them and so we have a very basic hedgerow of them which is also a habitat for birds and such. Just one of those hedgerows can supply like I don't know how many pounds that we'll find out this year [laughter]. So we want more of that. You know we have rosemary hedges, we have ground covers of Oregano and Thyme. Then just basic things that are drought tolerant that self-sew like cilantro and green onions. Very basic simple things but they can be easily incorporated and shared and even preserved.

MUNOZ: Has anything been difficult to grow?

WEISMAN: We had several challenges. We had a big problem with squirrels last year. So we have this amazing almond tree that makes hundreds of almonds. It's not in the chef's gardens, it's off in another orchard. We never get any almonds because the squirrels ate them all so that's a challenge. We also have a lot of issues with a lot of our fruit trees are so well known to the community: the workers, the preschool centers, and just people in the community. We just get raided a lot. So we're working on signage, and a little more, you know community: "take a few, don't take them all" kind of thing and yeah, we've had some issues with last year I believe we bought some greens that were at the end of their cycle that were annuals and they just bolted right away. Things like that. We've had- Yeah, we're working on things like building trellises. We had a tomato, that just was a- we weren't expecting to be so amazing and we didn't trellis it last year so we were constantly battling with powdery mildew from lack of air flow and things like that. We're learning which is a part of gardening.

MUNOZ: So when was the garden founded?

WEISMAN: We are still searching for clarification on that and there should be, because it is so well done, there should be, you know, all the mapping for, we have the irrigation maps. I don't have the planting plans. We should have the design build and all that. It must be somewhere. I was told it was probably planted six to seven years ago when there was a major renovation done here and I believe it was a student led project. It was someone who was pretty much obviously studying something related and I was told that the first year that student headed it up and did an amazing job and then after that it was just kind of left, left on its own. So for many years it was left on its own and, no offense to the gardener maintaining it but the gardener when I came here [laughs], who was maintaining it, from his own mouth said he does not care about growing food, does not care to learn how to grow food and all he was doing was keeping it weeded. So the trees weren't being pruned and there wasn't much loving going on but, yeah there's still amazingly a lot of things that were self-sustainable happening in there. Like just a lot of the calendula flowers and borridge, that was all there. A lot of edible flowers and herbs were just- and different crops were kinda just

coming up. There's this watermelon that comes up every year that we don't plant.

MUNOZ: Really?!

WEISMAN: Yes [laughs]

MUNOZ: Alright!

WEISMAN: So, you know, and I would see different people, custodians, some of the- we have a, what do you call it, an elderly home at the top, Redwood Gardens and they come down so you'll see some of them you know, that makes them happy to pull some weeds. So there was stuff going on in there but it wasn't, wasn't getting what it needed.

MUNOZ: Alright, so what is your personal mission for this space?

WEISMAN: For me, it's really important that it's open to the community because one of the things that I think is really important is that everyone connects to the landscape and connects to food and that's kind of my mission. That's how I got started being a gardener for a living. I grew up in the country and I came out here to an urban area and I was working with high school students and they were scared to eat an apple off of an apple tree and just that blows my mind. That was one of my missions always, just find that joy, reconnect with this food that is pure and clean and here for you. So my goal for this garden is to demonstrate very simply how you can provide for yourself and your community. Yeah, I would just like it to stay an open place for not just the students but, Clark Kerr has its own thing going on. We have people from the neighborhood come walk through here. We have two childcare centers. They love to come to the garden. We have, you know, we can connect with the kitchen and the dining halls. So you know, further on, [at] Clark Kerr I'd like to expand edible landscaping and have food security and be able to provide more for who in the community needs the produce. But also just to keep connecting people because gardening is something everyone can do and should be doing.

MUNOZ: I completely agree!

WEISMAN: That's my goal.

MUNOZ: And then what is the leadership history of the running of the garden and then how does that compare to current leadership dynamics?

WEISMAN: Hmm, so I think a big stop gag in this sort of project happening has always been the management side at UC Berkeley and the politics and control and history. So I think as we are moving forward we are getting new leaders, people that are a little more conscious and are willing to learn new ways, which are really old

ways. In the grounds department there has been traditionally, and I'm not saying just here, but overall it's usually been very male dominated. There's actually, everywhere I've ever worked in a public setting, there's resistance to providing any sort of edible anything in the landscape. Like most bosses will, they will actually select an apple tree that is ornamental rather than an apple tree that would provide fruit and that's what I've seen. I've been a professional for sixteen years, seventeen years. It's been everywhere I've ever worked in [the] public sector and it's very odd and it usually is a kind of like an old school manager who just can't open their mind. So that would be the first thing. And then connecting, yes, the reason why this is succeeding at this point, and it's a little, it's groundbreaking for I think UC Berkeley is that the department and the manager, who is new, who worked his way up from the grounds is actually in support of the project and then there's me who is willing to work with the students and extend that to them. There's always like this control thing going on. So what happened when this garden started a student, who had amazing talent and passion, started it and then left. So that tends to happen. So the students come together and get all excited and want to build and grow this and that and the sustainability factor is missing because students are pretty much temporary. So you know, having a worker involved and a department involved, first of all you need that because we are responsible for the landscape and maintaining it. You have to have that first. And then, yes, we need to be developing more sustainable methods to keep the projects going. In this one, this is set up in such a partnership that we do have, I expect to have this continuing for many years. And I'm a permanent, I think I'm a permanent fixture here [laughs]. So I'm going to be here to kind of help that along. But you know, it could be, this is where it gets complicated. Like if I leave, you have to rely on that next gardener to be into it and willing to do that or capable of that. Like I said, the gardener who had it prior was like "I don't care, I don't want to grow anything" and then we didn't have a student group to be continuously developing projects with.

MUNOZ: So how many students do you have right now?

WEISMAN: They're actually with Caldining. There's two.

MUNOZ: Would you like to see that as a bigger number or is that more of like a budget constraint?

WEISMAN: No, I actually find it to be pretty perfect right now. For now, for what we're doing. Two students, I mean there's two students and then they are empowered to be managing other students. We have open hours twice a week this semester plus one Saturday because we're trying to include the students but that's, I really try to empower them to lead that. So that's kind of their role which is working out really well.

MUNOZ: Do you see, do you see those open hours, do you see a lot of students come through or do you see a lot of interest in that?

WEISMAN: We've fluctuated. We are trying to work on that. It's seems like we just started doing a once a month Saturday and that seems to work really well. It's been hard to get students here during hours that we're here but we had, last year we did a big fall festival. It was really, we grew a pumpkin. Oh gosh, how much did it weigh? It was the biggest pumpkin I've ever grown in my life. I wanna say it was four hundred pounds.

MUNOZ: Oh my god, where was it?

WEISMAN: It was the most beautiful pumpkin. In this lawn that we converted outside the chef's garden. We have pictures.

MUNOZ: How do you not get the bottom to rot?

WEISMAN: It didn't. You're supposed to turn them but it was just, I don't know how, that was the biggest, most beautiful pumpkin ever and we got the chefs to let us come in the kitchen and cook up a big curry.

MUNOZ: Oh my gosh!

WEISMAN: So we had a pumpkin curry and we had a big festival and we had a big turnout for that. That was, it was really amazing. And yeah, it usually starts out in the beginning of the year we have a kind of core group. We had a core group of about eight students that would come once a week. We would do different workshops but then people just start to get really busy and fall off [laughs].

MUNOZ: Oh yeah

WEISMAN: So that's a challenge we're working on.

MUNOZ: So in terms of what, who the garden is open to, so what are some of those, you mentioned there's a daycare and a retirement center, but what are some of the groups you work with on the Clark Kerr campus? Like are they- how close are they?

WEISMAN: Well we work with the chefs in the dining hall which is like a really nice relationship. They get so excited and one of my favorite things to see is just on a daily basis, you can come out and you'll just find a chef out there picking fresh herbs for you know, even just flavoring water kind of thing. It's beautiful. So we have that element. Yeah, I just see a lot of, you know, people from the neighborhood come here because the campus is such a nice place to take a walk or come sit down. I see them here a lot. We did a first- we were contacted by an elementary school teacher a couple weeks ago and she brought her fourth and fifth grade class here and they were studying food security.

MUNOZ: [gasps and laughs] Wow!!!

WEISMAN: And so, that's really impressive

MUNOZ: That's awesome!

WEISMAN: They came to us. She'd heard about Clark Kerr garden and the food pantry cause that's starting to be out in the media a bit and so she came to the garden and we did, we had a really successful workshop with the students.

MUNOZ: What did they do?

WEISMAN: I took them foraging around the garden. So just showing them the plants and having them eat them. Like "Hey, you can eat this flower, taste it!" and they loved it so much. They did a worm station. We have a worm bin going on so they fed the worms and set up the bed for them and talked about soil and structure and then I took them to this one orange tree that we have that has amazing oranges and they all got to pick some oranges. And planting, they helped plant and then from there they actually, they took a walk to the food pantry to see where the food goes.

MUNOZ: So they went on a, to the main campus? Wow!

WEISMAN: Mhm yeah, we're talking about trying to work more, because we have a preschool and a childcare, both who have their own raised beds as well and who come to our garden. So we'd like to work more with them. And then also definitely be open to the community if they, especially talking about food security, and showing them again these basic things like when they were here I was showing them, even some of these medicinal plants. "You guys should have this on your school yard. It's really easy. If you bruise yourself, you can you can put it on your bruise and..." stuff like that.

MUNOZ: That's awesome.

WEISMAN: Yeah, it was really awesome.

MUNOZ: And are there any groups that you wish that could be more involved, and if so, are there any barriers to collaborating with them?

WEISMAN: We have been working really hard to work with a group that actually reside here at Clark Kerr, is it GIF? Global- Oh gosh, I get really lost with all these-

MUNOZ: [laughs] So do I, don't worry!

WEISMAN: There is a group that studies environmental- I wanna say GIF. Natalia would know [laughs]. They actually live here and I think every year they try to come up with a project that involves, you know, something sustainable. Like they've been talking about rain gardens. I think they work with some of the professors here. We also have various professors that live here as well. The Padillas and then, I forget this man's name. He works with them. There's one of the professors here and I don't know what has been the issue but we've been having a really hard time getting a hold of them. I'm currently in the midst of redesigning several areas in my territory and I would love them to be involved cause again, that's that connection that they need to make. I've heard over and over again they get really excited and come up with plans to re-landscape an area that we're in charge of and they don't talk to the gardeners...

MUNOZ: Oh... Oh, okay.

WEISMAN: And they don't talk to the department and then it falls through, right?

MUNOZ: Right..

WEISMAN: Cause actually usually the boss is like "no" [laughs]. You know, so we're working on that connection. I want them involved.

MUNOZ: How big is that group?

WEISMAN: I'm not sure.

MUNOZ: Should I follow up with Natalia?

WEISMAN: Yes, please [laughs]

MUNOZ: Alright, ok.

WEISMAN: There's been some emails back and forth the past month but we still have not met with them.

MUNOZ: Okay, so for, in terms of outreach then, you've mentioned some of the festivals, you've mentioned the classes that come and people who are able to walk by and walk through as they please but are there other ways that you get the word out or is it more like a, is there a website for the garden? Or is there like a facebook page or a newsletter?

WEISMAN: We have a newsletter and a facebook page and again this is something the students lead, thankfully [laughs]. And they also do, we've done a couple things in the dining hall at dinner time, or they have, rather. We just ordered an official sign that's going to go up in the garden and we're going to start mapping. It's going to look like what you would find at a- like an East Bay Park kind of thing

with a map. Yeah, the Clark Kerr Garden isn't actually on the maps. So we are working with someone in the design department to

MUNOZ: So hopefully they add those.

WEISMAN: Yeah like put a little carrot on the map that we're here.

MUNOZ: Oh!! That'd be cute!!

WEISMAN: Yeah, something like that. So we're in the midst of working on that. And what else are we doing? I think just with this year of being involved with the global food security project, we're expecting to get more publicity just by being listed as being part of UC Berkeley's campus gardens.

MUNOZ: Okay and then, so what would you say is the relationship between leadership and students. Like is, are you kind of like the middle man for that or are there other people they could go to if there's ever any concerns with what's going on in the garden space?

WEISMAN: They are connected; I mean mostly with me. I would be the point person because I actually work with them but if they had an issue with me or anything going on or [laughs] which could happen, they can go to my supervisor. They are actually directly contacted, interaction with him. He's actually managing the budget aspect and he's very good at making sure at getting us what we need sort of thing. So yeah, I guess that would make me the middle person. I just, I guess I'm bringing my skillset and sharing that with the students is what I do. My role is gardener in that space so I just have to make sure things are done a certain way but I'm very open and organic about how we work together. Yeah, I want the students to be empowered as well and really feel like the time they put in, it's their project so we work together and that's really important to me too to have like a collective kind of feel to it. I'm not in charge, technically but I can be like "no!" [laughs].

MUNOZ: Do you see any need for improvement with that relationship or do you like how like it's, like the flow of it right now?

WEISMAN: With, specifically with the students that I'm working with now, I think we have a very good relationship and flow and I'm not having any issues with that, personally right now.

MUNOZ: Okay.

WEISAN: There's been concern in the past, sometimes [laughs] the students have overstepped boundaries a little bit but then we had to have a conversation about, it has always come down to a lack of communication or understanding and so we had to have conversations about that.

MUNOZ: Okay and then, what would be your perspective on equity and inclusion from a staff's perspective? So what does equity and inclusion kind of mean to you?

WEISMAN: Is this off one of the posters that HR put out? [laughter] What does it mean to me as a staff? That is really important! I mean I think that's like with this garden too, it's really enjoyed and has been really upheld by, I think the workers here. Mostly the custodians and you'll find little pockets of, usually the custodians for some reason, all over campus, guerilla gardening and because they cook together every day and yeah so I want there not to be such a caste system feeling and I feel like a lot of times if students dominate then maybe the workers don't feel comfortable anymore or welcome or appreciated and it just doesn't need to be that way. I think it can include everybody and I've seen that happening down here which is really important. So yeah, maybe opening things up even more publicly to be inclusive of the staff, not like we're just in the background because we technically almost live here [laughs]. We're here all the- some people have been here, you know, twenty years.

MUNOZ: Oh, dang.

WEISMAN: So, and you know we're workers. We come here every day. The custodians, this is like their home. We're making everything operate and you know, I'm the gardener out here. How can we be more, I mean what does it mean to me? It just means not having that caste system feeling and everyone has their own space and time but we should all be able to appreciate and share-

MUNOZ: Awesome

WEISMAN: And work together

MUNOZ: And do you consider, or how is, how is physical accessibility in this space considered? Like what about participation of those with sorts of disabilities? Like is that- basically are the gardens like ADA compliant or-

WEISMAN: Yes.

MUNOZ: Oh, okay.

WEISMAN: This one, the chef garden specifically is which is why it's such an amazing space. It absolutely is. The other orchards, definitely the one that James is working on the hill is not [laughs]. I'm not even sure how the students can really get up there. Yeah, that's always a concern and thought. Most of the spaces here are ADA accessible.

MUNOZ: But then here and there, there's a couple of spaces that could be improved upon?

WEISMAN: Mhm.

MUNOZ: Okay and then lastly, is there any, I guess, is there any data that you still think needs to be collected or would you like to see collected in terms of just improving upon the garden?

WEISMAN: One of the biggest things, and this is where networking with the other gardens, I think is really relevant, is yeah, planting times and what crops do well kind of thing. The way that I do gardening with edibles and crops I personally go to the nursery quickly- I do save seeds. Those are things we don't have a way to keep our seeds stored and that's a really important part of gardening is saving your seeds, and labeling, and knowing when to plant them. We don't have a place to plant them right now so we're trying to network on that level.

MUNOZ: Where are they kept right now?

WEISMAN: I keep them in a Tupperware container. Actually that beautiful pumpkin we grew had the most amazing seeds. We saved them all and then I just have a garage. I don't have- and it's flooded and mildew-y so all the seeds got mildew-y. All the pumpkin seeds got ruined. We had enough to plant, we could have...so that's such a bummer!

MUNOZ: Oh no!!

WEISMAN: It's one of our biggest things yeah and then just working on tightening down exactly when to plant what and then when is its harvest time? When are we going to be able to provide that crop. Getting that down. I know the Gill Tract has that pretty down so we're still working on that.

MUNOZ: Okay, well, that's all I have for you. Thank you so much for meeting with me again, I really appreciate you taking the time from this beautiful day to do this. So yeah, this is the end.

