Becoming 'Good Neighbors': Co-Creating Spaces for Interspecies Hospitality in Urban Encounters

Authors
Emily Schneider

Discipline
Cultural Analysis and European Studies

Keywords
Plants / Hospitality / Neighbors / Reciprocity / Gift

Doi
doi.org/10.61299/we163AJ

Amsterdam Museum Journal
Issue #4 Summer 2025

Abstract

Cities are diverse ecosystems, inhabited by various life forms that interact, share each other’s space, and co-create urban life. This essay is an attempt to learn about the conjuncture of interspecies reciprocity, hospitality, gift-giving practices, and the co-creation of urban spaces, while focusing on the potential for and complexity of neighborly relationships between humans and plants. Borrowing the concept of the ‘good neighbor’ from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass, it considers the conditions under which relationships based on care and responsibility can thrive through ‘circular reciprocity’. Sites for close interspecies encounters, like urban foraging practices and community gardens, show the potential of a caring and attentive striving toward neighborliness but also reveal the multiplicity and ambiguity of what can be considered different, sometimes irreconcilable, interests and needs of various urban dwellers. Nevertheless, this essay argues that the practice of becoming ‘good neighbors’ ultimately benefits both humans and plants.

"What if you were a teacher but had no voice to speak your knowledge? What if you had no language at all and yet there was something you need to say? Wouldn't you dance it? Wouldn't you act it out? Wouldn't your every movement tell the story? In time you would become so eloquent that just to gaze upon you would reveal it all. And so it is with these silent green lives". (Robin Wall Kimmerer 2020, 128-9)

Introduction

Growing up in a small village in Southern Germany, I was constantly surrounded by sloping grass-covered hillsides and small woodlands with mossy grounds that seemed to swallow all noise. When I first moved to a city, I began searching for spaces that offered similar experiences. Luckily, this is not as difficult as I expected. Currently, I live in Amsterdam and encounter plant life every day, all around me. From the city's many parks and elegant elm trees lining the canals – which are not only characteristic of the city's landscape but serve the practical function of strengthening the swampy soil along the waterways with their roots (Bons 2018; Los 2018; van Steenberg et al. 2021) – to weeds finding their way through cracks in the pavement, plants share urban spaces with us humans.

Indeed, urban spaces are diverse ecosystems populated by many different lifeforms that interact and co-create urban life.1 Co-creation, in this context, refers to spaces and processes of collaboration and encounters between humans and plants within urban environments. It is about shaping the city through practices of reciprocity that benefit each other's flourishing and enable humans and plants to thrive. However, co-creation in interspecies encounters is not always a seamless collaborative process with a shared goal. Instead, it is often characterized by conflicting and even irreconcilable goals and agencies, so co-creation happens with some degree of judgment and exclusion.

Within this essay, I will primarily focus on Amsterdam, but refer to other spatial contexts to illustrate the diversity and complexity of multispecies co-creation. I will closely examine some of the existing spaces for multispecies co-creation, the dynamics between humans and plant life that occur within them, and consider the potential to enhance our urban environments to benefit many inhabitants through attentiveness and care. Therefore, the following essay will grapple with how we can become 'good neighbors' with urban plants and co-create spaces for interspecies hospitality in our cities. I will conduct close readings of foraging practices and community garden projects, and consider how we co-create our cities in multispecies encounters.

My theoretical framework draws from a variety of fields and disciplinary traditions, including Indigenous epistemes. Therefore, it is crucial to note that while my analysis heavily relies on concepts coined by Indigenous theorists such as Rauna Kuokkanen and Robin Wall Kimmerer regarding gift-giving, hospitality, and neighborliness, this is not a lived experience I share. At this point, it is important to stress that being 'Indigenous' is not a monolith, and I am aware of the potential to be reductive when using this term. I do not seek to generalize or homogenize experiences and epistemes of different Indigenous groups within my analysis. However, there seem to be certain overlapping tendencies between different Indigenous worldviews. For instance, Kuokkanen suggests that they are generally more focused on a holistic view of the "*human relationship* with *the world*" (Kuokkanen 2006, 255) than Western philosophical conventions. In this context, she mentions the expression 'all my relations' as used by many North American Indigenous peoples, which highlights a focus on "*kinship and interdependence with the world and all life forms*" (Kuokkanen 2006, 255)2.

Additionally, Indigenous people worldwide remain in a lingering colonial situation and are largely not self-determined (Kuokkanen 2006), which makes it especially crucial not to romanticize or simplify their paradigms. Furthermore, Kuokkanen notes that "*Indigenous epistemologies consider the knower as situated in his or her community and knowledge as rooted in and stemming from a specific location*" (Kuokkanen 2006, 254). As described by Édouard Glissant, it is essential to consider the right for 'opacity' in cross-cultural encounters (Glissant 1997) and recognize that one can never fully know the perspective of an 'Other'. Consequently, as a non-Indigenous researcher working within Western urban environments, I do not claim a complete understanding of these concepts or the completeness of my analysis. Instead, this essay attempts to think with concepts like Wall Kimmerer's 'good neighbor' and 'gift economy,' as well as Kuokkanen's conceptualizations of gift-giving and hospitality, to gain insights into how urban spaces are co-created by humans and plants, and the potentialities for making cities into places of multispecies flourishing. I approach these questions from a place of learning and critical reflection, aiming to engage respectfully with Indigenous scholarship while acknowledging the limitations of my standpoint. Throughout this essay, I will sometimes refer to a 'we' that has to strive toward becoming good neighbors – with this, I aim to speak to all readers of this essay, in particular those living in Western urban environments and craving a deeper relationship with the space they inhabit and the plants that share it with them.

Becoming 'Good Neighbors'

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, originally published in 2013, Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that Indigenous knowledge and scientific perspectives are complementary, and that an abundance of knowledge is revealed to us if we listen to plants as our teachers. A fascinating plant teaching pertinent to the co-creation of any ecosystem is the concept of the 'good neighbor', or more precisely, the process of *becoming* a 'good neighbor'.

Wall Kimmerer introduces this term when she describes the immigration story of broadleaf plantains, also known as *Plantago major* or *White Man's Footstep*. The plant is native to Europe but was brought to North America by European settlers and naturalized there over time (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 213 ff.). It is not an Indigenous plant, but it is often considered native as it fits well into the preexisting ecosystem and possesses many healing qualities, without harming the surrounding plants (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 214). According to Wall Kimmerer, the story of this plant can teach us that by giving freely and slowly building trust and relationships, one *becomes* a 'good neighbor' and valued member of a community or ecosystem.

Being a 'good neighbor' and co-creator is about reciprocity, but not necessarily in the form of binary exchange. In her book *The Serviceberry* (2024), Wall Kimmerer describes reciprocity as a currency within a 'gift economy', not as a direct form of payment but rather as something that "*keep[s] the gift in motion*" (Wall Kimmerer 2024, 14). This can be described as a 'circular reciprocity' – one is not giving to receive a direct counter-gift, but to acknowledge and affirm relationships and being "*attuned to the world beyond oneself*" (Kuokkanen 2007, 39). 'Circular reciprocity' can be considered a way of being attentive and caring for each other to foster reciprocal relationships. Thus, being a 'good neighbor' to urban plant life involves acknowledging the role humans play within a city's ecosystem and taking responsibility for one another.

One central aspect of such 'circular reciprocity' is the concept of 'care'. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Wall Kimmerer describes the usually unwritten rules of the 'Honorable Harvest', an "*indigenous canon of principles and practices that govern the exchange of life for life*" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 180), and begins with: "*Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them*" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 183). This notion of 'care' implies a certain intimacy that comes with knowing the other's needs. There is no step-by-step guide on how to 'take care of those who take care of us' – instead, we need to find the most suitable mode of 'caring' by paying attention to the needs of our neighbors.3 The particular context of our encounter can require our 'care' to take on different shapes, which might

“No one had to teach them how to care for the strawberries; they learned by closely observing the plants after the initial gift sparked their interest.”

change over time, but the first step is to establish conditions in which we can strive toward such 'care' and 'attentiveness'.

Therefore, I will borrow Wall Kimmerer's concept of the 'good neighbor' to consider the conditions under which relationships based on care and responsibility can thrive between humans and their environments, particularly between humans and plants within urban ecosystems. Akin to a gift, which can be understood as a token of responsibility for fostering an ongoing relationship (Wall Kimmerer 2020), successful relationship-building and co-creation of hospitable environments is not an unconditional practice but a mutually beneficial investment in one's relationships with others.

Theory of the Gift

The relationship-building potential of gifts is beautifully illustrated through an anecdote on strawberries shared by Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. She describes how her siblings and she found strawberries in a field, like "*gifts from the earth*" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 24). After strawberry season was over, they observed the plants sending out runners over the field to create new plants (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 25). This observation inspired them to clear small areas of ground for the runners, which resulted in more strawberry plants the following year (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 25). No one had to teach them how to care for the strawberries; they learned by closely observing the plants after the initial gift sparked their interest (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 25). With this, a 'circular reciprocity' of gift-giving and attentive care was born.4

Gift-giving is a much-theorized cultural phenomenon. In his influential text *Essai sur le don* [translation: '*The Gift*'], first published in 1925, French anthropologist Marcel Mauss describes the existence of gift exchanges in various traditional societies5 (Mauss 1954). While they seem voluntary, they are usually steeped in social obligations of reciprocity, through which social ties are created and maintained (Mauss 1954). Furthermore, Mauss notes that an object given as a gift carries a part of the giver's essence, which generates enduring bonds between the giver and recipient (Mauss 1954). Through this relationship-building capacity of gifts and counter-gifts, one can consider mutual gift-giving a form of co-creation. However, Mauss' theory is limited by its focus on human-to-human interactions as well as the implied power dynamics in which gift exchanges happen.

Precisely these power dynamics and bonds are seen rather negatively by French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida. In *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, he argues that for a gift to be genuine, it cannot involve

any reciprocity or even recognition as a gift by either the giver or recipient (Derrida 1992). As soon as a gift is recognized as such by the recipient, this recognition turns into a 'symbolic equivalent' (Derrida 1992). The gift-giving process becomes an exchange in which the gift-giver desires something, such as recognition or even gratitude, which contradicts the genuine nature of the gift (Derrida 1992). For Derrida, the gift is a paradox never truly outside the bounds of social structures and expectations6.

However, Derrida's perspective on the coercion exerted through the power structures in which gift-giving necessarily takes place is understood as limiting by French sociologist Alain Caillé7. He suggests that a gift can have ambivalent and plural motives, ranging from generous to self-interested (Caillé 2018). For Caillé, gifts and counter-gifts are at the core of society, exceeding the economic dimension and functioning instead as 'political operators' that produce social relations (Caillé 2018). With this, Caillé expands Mauss's perspective beyond the social obligation of the counter-gift and critiques Derrida's exploration of the gift as removed from lived reality.

Drawing from the work of US-American feminist philosopher Genevieve Vaughan8, Sámi researcher and Professor for Arctic Indigenous Politics Rauna Kuokkanen describes gift-giving practices in terms of two co-existing paradigms: a 'gift model' and an 'exchange model' (Kuokkanen 2006, 257)9. While the gift model is 'other-oriented', the exchange model relies on a 'double gift', where the recipient is expected to give back something of equal or comparable value to the person from whom they have received a gift (Kuokkanen 2006). In contrast to Derrida, Kuokkanen sees a possibility for a genuine gift within an 'other-oriented' gift model. Further, Kuokkanen contrasts the Western understanding of gift-giving practices with the perspective of an Indigenous 'gift logic' (Kuokkanen 2007). She argues, that in Indigenous epistemes the 'logic of the gift' transcends a mere exchange: a genuine gift might be impossible within a Western logic with its economic bias, but it is conceivable within an Indigenous understanding of the gift, which centers reciprocity and responsibility 'toward all others' (Kuokkanen 2007).

While there are many variations in both Western and Indigenous theories on gift-giving, the idea of transcending an 'exchange model' in favor of a more relational understanding of the concept opens doors toward becoming a 'good neighbor'. Indeed, the responsibilities and relationships crafted by such a perspective on gift-giving are often rewarded with benefits that exceed simple bilateral exchanges. Instead, they create lasting systems of mutual care and continuous sharing (Wall Kimmerer 2020). Of

course, this does not mean that plants care for humans in the same way humans care for them or each other, but they act as 'good neighbors' to us, contributing to the urban ecosystem they inhabit according to their capabilities.

Hospitality in Multispecies Encounters

Cities are 'contact zones' as described by US-American linguist and literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt – spaces where "*cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power*" (Pratt 1991, 34). In the case of urban green spaces, 'cultures' can be broadened to species. Humans, animals, and plants come with their needs, desires, and unique qualities, sharing space and shaping it according to their realms of influence.

Such spaces can also be described as 'borderlands', a term coined by Mexican American cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. According to Anzaldúa, 'borderlands' are dynamic zones of transition and cultural exchange that challenge established boundaries (Anzaldúa 1987). Despite writing about migration within the geographic context of the US-Mexican border, Anzaldúa's ideas can be applied broadly to any boundary at which such change and transition occur. In this way, urban green spaces are places of contestation, where the agencies of all involved co-habitants are tested, and those not deemed as full agents – in our animal, and particularly human-centered worldview, that is usually plants and inanimate objects – are relegated to a liminal position, a limbo, a perpetual 'guest-ness'.

Urban green spaces offer many possibilities for interspecies hospitality. Yet, the distinction between 'host' and 'guest' can be muddied. As described by Derrida from a Western deconstructionist perspective, hospitality is a complex and paradoxical term. On the one hand, only unconditional hospitality is 'true hospitality'; on the other hand, hospitality within exchange economies is usually conditional, and the 'host' is in control of the threshold that the 'guest' might cross temporarily (Derrida 1999). Applying this to urban green spaces would mean that the 'host' holds the ultimate power while allowing the 'guest' marginal and temporally limited access to their space. He argues that to achieve true, unconditional hospitality, there must be a willingness to surrender control when allowing a guest into one's space because "*if you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house [...] there is no hospitality*" (Derrida 1999, 70-1).

The case of invasive species emphasizes the challenges of such a 'true hospitality'. For instance, *Cryptostegia grandiflora*, commonly known as rubber

“Those not deemed as full agents – in our animal, and particularly human-centered worldview, that is usually plants and inanimate objects – are relegated to a liminal position, a limbo, a perpetual ‘guest-ness’.”

vine, is originally from Madagascar but has been brought to Australia for its use in rubber production (Head et al. 2015). It was introduced in 1875 and has since naturalized as an invasive species due to its great adaptability, spatial mobility, and capacity to influence the behavior of other plants and animals in the ecosystem (Head et al. 2015). However, its dense growth habits threaten the biodiversity of native ecosystems (Head et al. 2015). This ecological imbalance exemplifies the impossibility of extending unconditional hospitality as described by Derrida.

Based on Derrida's treatment of hospitality, Kuokkanen stresses in her book *Reshaping the University* (2007)10 that being a "*good host implies [...] a commitment to responsibility [...] [and] infinite openness toward the other*" (Kuokkanen 2007, 3). With Kuokkanen's 'gift logic' in mind, it becomes clear that hospitality and openness toward an 'Other' is more an invitation to take space and shape one's surroundings through giving and taking according to one's capabilities and needs rather than a strict binary expression of power. Hospitality is then about recognizing and welcoming relations that can be reciprocal and life-sustaining. However, as demonstrated by the example of invasive species like rubber vine, what can be considered 'life-sustaining' is not universal. Instead, rubber vine is both ecologically destructive and economically beneficial, highlighting that the values of humans, such as urban planners, play a crucial role in deciding which lives are sustained and which are not.

Despite the undeniable importance of human values in urban co-creation, it is important to problematize the opposition of humans and plants in 'contact zones' and 'borderlands'. Indeed, highlighting such power dynamics risks reinforcing a dichotomy of plants and humans as separate rather than co-creators. The 'contact zones' and 'borderlands' within which human-plant encounters happen are shaped by the complex and fluid entanglements between different species. Both exert mutual influence in shared environments. While plants are often seen as passive elements within these entanglements, they have agency, unique qualities, growth patterns, and resilience that make them active participants of their ecosystems (Ryan 2012, 102 ff.). For instance, plants possess phytochemicals, which are hypothesized to act as a defense mechanism against diseases and predators (Molyneux et al. 2007, 2974). These bioactive compounds are a central aspect of how plants interact with and shape their environments, challenging human-centered understandings of agency. That is to say, plants are different from humans. Instead of anthropomorphizing them, humans might learn more about plants through curiosity and attunement to how they express their needs and interact with their 'neighbors'. However, our

perspective will always be shaped to some degree by our situatedness as humans, so attempts toward interspecies hospitality, neighborliness, and 'circular reciprocity' will be a striving and practice rather than a finished project.

Therefore, any attempt to understand the co-creation of our cities should include the contributions of more-than-human actors, such as plants, in the creation and maintenance of urban ecosystems. When shifting the focus of interspecies hospitality away from power and toward openness, we, as Western urbanites, might heighten our receptiveness to lessons on neighborliness from unexpected agents. Nevertheless, interspecies hospitality in urban spaces is always mediated by the cultural imaginaries and ecological knowledge of the city's human inhabitants. While some might consider a plant a weed, others can understand it as a remedy, food, resource, or valued neighbor. This plurality in perceptions and interests highlights the political dimension of interspecies co-creation. It matters whose knowledge and needs are considered in deciding which life forms are welcomed in the city11.

Urban Foraging

On a sunny day in April, I joined a guided foraging walk in *Park Frankendael* in Amsterdam. It was organized by *Urban Herbology*, which offers foraging walks, workshops, and courses to "*inspire individuals to cultivate a deeper connection with their local environment, using herbs as a gateway to better health, well-being, and environmental stewardship*" (Urban Herbology).

On the most basic level, urban foraging is about finding food that grows in the city, including herbs, flowers, roots, and nuts. It is also a practice of noticing and being attentive to the plants co-habiting urban spaces with us. As described by Field philosopher Thom van Dooren from the Australian University of Sydney, 'attentiveness' is "*both a practice of getting to know another in their intimate particularity [...] and [...] a practice of learning how one might [...] cultivate worlds of mutual flourishing*" (Van Dooren et al. 2016, 17). It is a way to get to know the ecosystem one inhabits and appreciate the deeply entangled web of life.

As a group of seven, we embarked on a journey of attentiveness. While taking a gentle-paced walk through the park, we stopped every few meters to pay close attention to the different edible plants we encountered. We looked at them, felt them, smelled them, and – sometimes – tasted them. We ate fresh magnolia leaves that we caught as they fell from the trees, rubbed different plants between our fingers to recognize their scents, and

“It is not a direct exchange, an hour of labor for an apple, but a continuous commitment to cultivating the garden. (...) Ultimately, community gardens teach urban dwellers that being a ‘good neighbor’ is the continuous commitment to caring for other human and non-human community members, fostering tight bonds and mutual flourishing.”

carefully plucked ramson leaves to take home with us. Our guide made sure to emphasize the importance of not damaging the plants and never taking too much from a plant or spot.

Next to the historical *Huize Frankendael*, there are some foraging gardens filled to the brim with edible plants growing in a magnificent, organized chaos. They are *care*fully maintained, adapting and responding to the needs of the plants they house. While sitting on the ground of one such foraging garden, sharing crackers with ramson pesto and teas from foraged herbs, it was easy to romanticize a life in reciprocal harmony with urban nature. However, without the guidance of an experienced herbalist, the skills required for urban foraging can be daunting. Indeed, an intimate knowledge of the local and seasonal vegetation is necessary to avoid potentially poisonous plants. For example, our guide advised beginners to avoid foraging any plants from the *Apiaceae* family, which includes wild carrots, but also poison hemlock. As they are from the same family, they share many visual characteristics, such as fern-like leaves and white, clustered flowers.

Despite its risks, urban foraging is growing in popularity among Western urban dwellers. One example of this is *Edible Alchemy*. On their *Instagram* page, *ediblealchemy.co*, they offer accessible education on foraging and fermentation to more than two hundred thousand followers. The company was founded in Canada in 2012 to teach people about food fermentation and preservation. In their second branch in Berlin, they offer in-person and online workshops at the intersection of sustainable food, fermentation, and digestive health (Edible Alchemy). When following social media accounts and blogs like *Edible Alchemy*, or even participating in a local foraging walk, it becomes clear that urban foraging can help urban dwellers develop deeper relationships with the food they consume. Indeed, the city can become like an open pantry12.

However, the knowledge required to determine which plants are safe for consumption goes beyond correctly identifying edible plant species. It also includes avoiding plants found near litter and busy roads, as well as being aware of the soil quality in the area where they are found. In Amsterdam, the soil in many neighborhoods contains lead from past and present industrial use (City of Amsterdam). In these contaminated areas, it is not recommended to eat plants grown directly in the ground, but rather those grown in separate containers filled with clean soil (City of Amsterdam). The municipality provides maps on which one can check the expected lead contamination by postcode (City of Amsterdam). This means that a responsible urban forager has to have a detailed understanding of not only the plants they plan to gather, but also the past and present specificities of

the location in which they are active. Becoming a 'good neighbor' can be demanding, as it requires the knowledge and skills necessary for a meaningful engagement with the ecosystems one inhabits.

Through urban foraging, human city dwellers can enjoy the gifts plants provide. In turn, these plants can benefit from plant-friendly urban planning, such as the foraging gardens in *Park Frankendael*. Ideally, the exchange of gifts in urban foraging practices is beneficial to all involved – an example of 'circular reciprocity'. The food harvested by urban foragers can be considered a gift that creates lasting bonds between humans and plants (Caillé 2018; Mauss 1954). Subsequently, experienced foraging guides can take on a valuable mediating role between plants and city planners, as they often have a detailed and intimate knowledge of plants and the urban environments in which they grow. This way, we can circumvent the asymmetrical power dynamics that can appear in multispecies hospitalities (Derrida 1999) and allow spaces for co-creation and mutual care.

Indeed, practices like urban foraging, which schools the capacity for noticing the non-human city dwellers that share our urban ecosystems with us, we as Western urban dwellers can become aware of the "*infinite web of relationships*" (Kuokkanen 2004, 71) that lies at the core of Kuokkanen's 'logic of the gift'. As described by Wall Kimmerer in *The Serviceberry*, "*all flourishing is mutual*" (Wall Kimmerer 2024, 33). If we take only what we need and in a manner that does not harm the plant, there is a good chance that it will continue to care for us in return.

Community Gardens

More clearly demarcated spaces for urban multispecies encounters of care and 'circular reciprocity' can be found in community gardens. Indeed, an increase in community gardens and similar initiatives correlates with increased well-being and longevity in the respective urban neighborhoods (Galle 2024). Both human gardeners and the plants populating a garden contribute to the local community and urban ecosystem. To keep a community garden running, a group of volunteers has to consistently show up and care for the garden, which will then reward them with a bountiful harvest. It is not a direct exchange, an hour of labor for an apple, but a continuous commitment to cultivating the garden. This responsibility and the resulting benefits can be shared among different members of a community according to their abilities and needs. Ultimately, community gardens teach urban dwellers that being a 'good neighbor' is the continuous commitment to caring for other human and non-human community members, fostering tight bonds and mutual flourishing.

One example of a community-run garden project is the *Voedseltuin IJplein* in Amsterdam Noord. It was founded in 2014 and is maintained by local volunteers (Voedseltuin IJplein). The yield in vegetables and herbs is shared between the contributing volunteers and donated to local food banks. The garden serves as a low-threshold meeting place and a means to support community members in need through food donations.

This illustrates how relationships between different urban dwellers are fostered through the exchange of gifts. Through the gift of cultivating the soil in which plants grow, gardeners are subsequently rewarded with nourishment that they can then gift to others. Relationships are built and nurtured through mutual gift-giving and care. Not everyone within such a local network or community has to contribute something of equal value for the 'circular reciprocity' to function as long as the gift is kept in motion (Wall Kimmerer 2024).

Additionally, community gardens offer a space for encounters between humans, plants, and even urban wildlife. This makes them 'contact zones' and 'borderlands'. Gardens are spaces co-created by a variety of species that all bring their qualities, desires, and limitations. Further, they are where the demarcations and influences between different species are negotiated. However, while, for instance, sowing and harvesting times are determined by the needs and characteristics of the plants in a garden, the decision for which plants are deemed worthy to occupy the beds is usually made by humans.

A slightly different approach to community gardening can be found in the foraging gardens next to *Huize Frankendael*. While they are still gardens with an element of planning and cultivation, they are populated by many plants that are commonly considered 'weeds' by gardeners, such as stinging nettles. Additionally, they are not planted in neat rows organized by kind, but grow according to their preferences. This makes the foraging gardens excellent spaces for observing plants and learning from them.

For instance, cleavers can be found among stinging nettles, using them as ladders to grow. This might appear one-sided, as the stinging nettles do not receive any immediate support in return. Yet, they are also not negatively affected by the cleavers and can indirectly benefit from the enhanced biodiversity in the ecosystem. This observation teaches us humans that being a 'good neighbor' does not mean self-sacrifice to care for the 'Other'. In many ways, our plant teachers appear very eager to focus on their benefit. However, the health of the overall ecosystem and the web of relationships is still a precondition for their thriving. Similarly, wild strawberries have been planted in the foraging garden with the objective

of caring for the plant. Yet, this care is not selfless, but motivated by the promise of sweet, red gifts to be found in the future. The *care*ful attention provided for them is a 'gift', but it is also an investment in a mutually beneficial relationship.

These observations raise the question of power dynamics again. Despite all efforts to consider the needs and characteristics of plants, community garden projects seem to serve primarily human interests, such as food production and fostering social relations. However, compromises with plant- and other non-human agents can be found in small but meaningful ways, for instance, through embracing 'weeds', allowing polycultures, and planting with pollinators in mind. The example of the foraging garden demonstrates that it is possible to strive toward gardens that provide for both human and more-than-human needs. Through the *care*ful attention to the needs and gifts of plants cultivated by gardeners, they can take on an essential mediating role between plant and human interests within the context of urban planning.

Neighbors and Co-Creation

Following the lessons of urban foraging and community gardens, it becomes clear that being a 'good neighbor' is about finding one's space in an ecosystem and contributing to its co-creation through attention and care (Wall Kimmerer 2020). Additionally, urban planning that prioritizes the well-being of plants also directly benefits human well-being (Galle 2024). According to Dutch-Canadian ecological engineer Nadina Galle, trees and other plants impact the microclimate of a city by reducing the surrounding temperature, providing shade, and releasing moisture into the air (Galle 2024, 51). Considering the increase in heatwaves expected in the coming years (Galle 2024), prioritizing the needs of plants in urban planning is a valuable strategy for creating more livable urban futures.

Yet, while the ideal of urban co-creation and neighborliness emphasizes a harmonious balance between human and plant interests, what is 'good' for one might not always be 'good' for the other. For example, while humans often prefer parks with regularly mowed lawns for picnics and games, many plants would thrive in a biodiverse environment with dense undergrowth. Of course, there are opportunities for compromise that can be negotiated between human and non-human actors, such as dedicating different areas of a park to center the needs of either plants or humans. Becoming 'good neighbors' and reconciling different 'goods' requires us to embrace multiplicity and ambiguity. Even among human city dwellers and between plants, conflicting interests are at play. While it is not possible to

“Through the gift of cultivating the soil in which plants grow, gardeners are subsequently rewarded with nourishment that they can then gift to others. Relationships are built and nurtured through mutual gift-giving and care. Not everyone within such a local network or community has to contribute something of equal value for the ‘circular reciprocity’ to function as long as the gift is kept in motion (Wall Kimmerer 2024).”

discard our human perspective, through paying close attention to our plant neighbors, we can come closer to understanding what is 'good' for each other.

Urban green spaces, such as parks, community gardens, or street trees, are 'contact zones' and 'borderlands' that are contested and co-created by both human and non-human actors. Nevertheless, not all such spaces offer the same conditions for urban co-creation and reciprocity. Indeed, the path to *becoming* a 'good neighbor' is not a template that can be copied, but a practice that has to grow through the careful attention to the intricate entanglements of beings in any particular place. Indeed, 'place' and its 'trans-local'13 entanglements are a central factor for urban multispecies co-creation. For instance, while community gardens are frequently spaces for collaboration between both human and non-human actors, botanical gardens have a history rooted in Western colonial expansion, resource extraction, and a desire to catalogue and control nature (Blais 2022; Center for Plants and Culture). While this history does not necessarily minimize present-day potentials for plant agency, many botanical gardens are still meticulously maintained and curated. Plants are often perceived as specimens and objects rather than collaborators (Center for Plants and Culture). However, plants are not humans, and they being perceived as objects does not necessarily diminish their potential to exert agency through, for instance, growth patterns, phytochemicals, and root networks.

No matter how attentive we humans are to our plant teachers, we are unable to leave our human perspective behind. Plants perceive and shape the world differently from humans, and there will always be a level of 'opacity' in our relationships (Glissant 1997). Nevertheless, by learning the language of the plants that surround us, we can attempt to be an interpreter for their needs and perspectives. While this carries the risk of projecting human ideas and values onto plants, it also offers the chance to develop multispecies care. A first step in this direction could be the resolve to become 'good neighbors' to our plant co-habitants by paying attention to the lessons they are teaching us.

Furthermore, urban planners could greatly benefit from seeking advice from humans who have already cultivated close relationships with plants, such as foragers and gardeners. While every possible mediation is situated and influenced by the experts' individual experiences, needs, and cultural knowledge, they are often the closest many Western cities can currently come to giving our plant neighbors a seat at the table when deciding how to shape urban ecosystems.

“For instance, cleavers can be found among stinging nettles, using them as ladders to grow. (...) This observation teaches us humans that being a ‘good neighbor’ does not mean self-sacrifice to care for the ‘Other’. In many ways, our plant teachers appear very eager to focus on their benefit.”