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Perceptions of urban residents on the cultural and ecological roles of residential gardens in Gampaha district, Sri Lanka

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Urban residential gardens provide recreational, socio cultural and environmental services to urban communities. However, the degree to which the urban residents recognize, and value of these services is unclear where a complex assortment of interacting socio-economic factors govern the perceptions of urban residents towards the role of residential gardens. Due to the limited attention on urban residential landscapes in Sri Lanka, the present study was conducted targeting the urban community in the Gampaha Divisional Secretariat (DS) to evaluate the perceptions towards cultural, environmental and conservation values of the residential gardens. A pre-tested, interviewer-administrated questionnaire was used to collect the socio-economic details of 50 randomly selected households located within the 2 km radius of the city center of the Gampaha DS. Perceptions on environmental, cultural and the conservation services of residential gardens were evaluated based on a 5-point Likert scale. The Chi-square test of association was used to identify the significant socio-economic factors that influence the perceptions of the respondents. The majority of the respondents were 51-65 years old (41.7%), followed by >65 years (25%) and 36-50 years old (25%). About 45.8% of the respondents had completed a basic degree qualification, while 41.7% had completed Advanced Level qualification. Retired household heads dominated the sample (37.5%), followed by those occupied in the private sector (29.2%). The highest fraction (32%) of the respondents received a monthly income ranging from USD 400 – USD 600. Stress release/health benefits, pollution control, and aesthetic value of plants/flowers, were ranked as the highest benefits of residential gardens, with mean scores of 4.90, 4.84 and 4.82, respectively. The majority of respondents (84%) strongly agreed with the statement that residential gardens can connect people with nature (Mean Score=4.82). Among the respondents, 24% had a highly positive attitude on the importance of residential gardens as entities of ecosystem conservation, while 34% of the respondents showed a neutral attitude. According to the Chi-square test, income, age, education and employment were significantly associated with the attitudes of the respondents towards the socio cultural services of residential gardens. Meanwhile, only the education was significantly associated with attitudes on the conservation values of residential gardens ($p<0.05$). The results reflect the desire of urban dwellers to experience a pleasant and fresh natural environment even in the middle of an urban lifestyle. Since people tend to feel the nature in the direct and the closest living environment in their everyday lives, residential gardens should be considered as the primary unit of concern in urban green space planning. Hence, understanding people's perceptions of gardens could be help in designing and improving the urban green spaces.

Keywords: Attitudes, Gampaha, Residential gardens, Urban green spaces