

Allotment gardens: where urban farming is old-school

During this gardening year, the allotment gardeners throughout Europe have once again shown how local fruit and vegetable cultivation works in urban areas. The more than 2 million allotment gardener families that are united in the Office International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins Familiaux have cultivated, harvested and used an enormous variety of fruit, vegetables and other horticultural products. Thus, allotment gardeners have been making their contribution to urban agriculture for more than 200 years, which has been increasingly discussed in Germany and throughout Europe in recent years and is gaining in importance.



The consequences of climate change and resource scarcity are being discussed worldwide. One of the approaches to safely supplying the population with food crops is the small-scale and regional cultivation of crops in the city. The advantages of the so-called urban farming are obvious. Food is produced where its consumption takes place and transport chains become shorter. In times of global networking, these have reached enormous dimensions and are, therefore, one of the major challenges with regard to the climate change.

Locally produced food plants, on the other hand, are not only much fresher when sold or served on our own plate, but their rapid consumption also means that the storage costs are eliminated, which further reduces the ecological footprint, i.e. the CO₂ balance of each individual.

The idea of growing food regionally is more modern than ever, because today the main focus in the allotment gardens is on the production of healthy food and vegetables in organic quality for one's own consumption. However, gardening in the city has some additional effects. It improves the urban micro-climate and contributes to the preservation of biodiversity.

For example, a study carried out in 2008 by the German allotment garden federation in cooperation with the federal ministry of agriculture (1) found that 59 species of fruit can be found in allotment gardens, but only 30 in productive horticulture as well as 114 vegetable species in allotment gardens and only 35 species in productive horticulture. However, the most important statement of the study was that more than 2090 cultivated plant species were found in German allotment gardens, whereas the even much greater diversity of varieties of these plant species has not yet been recorded. Allotment gardens thus make a major contribution to the genetic diversity of crop plants i.e. to biodiversity.

In Austria, a three-year biodiversity study on behalf of the Central Federation of allotment gardeners made in 40 gardens in the four most important climate zones of Vienna, was presented in 2019 (2). This study underlined that, depending on the climate area, between 172 and 250 plant species or genera from up to 82 plant families were found in these gardens.

As far as the plant pathogens were concerned, there was even a worldwide first description of a mildew (*Peronospora Albugo Brevia*) named the „*Asteromella forsythia* Bedlan“ which was found in the 14th communal district of Vienna. Additionally, there was a first finding of an already known fungal disease for Austria and several first findings in Vienna.

In Switzerland, in 2019 a survey concerning wild bees was made on the Wehrenbach allotment garden site in Zurich. 111 species were found, almost a fifth of the species known in Switzerland. About half of the found species are rare or endangered and some of them have so far only been found on this site in Zurich. Some of them were even thought to have already disappeared (3).

Additionally, gardening stimulates an integrated town development. It opens up new educational contents and sensitises for a sustainable life-style. In this context an allotment garden site in Turku in Finland received the Office diploma for social activities in 2020 for its project to sensitize children for a sustainable lifestyle (4). Additionally, a common garden stimulates meetings and the engagement for the urban quarter.

*Sandra von Rekowski, Thomas Wagner, BDG,
Malou WEIRICH, Office International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins
Familiaux*

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