

The activities of the allotment and leisure garden movement for the benefit of children and teenagers

Allotments are playing a more and more important role in our society, not only for long-standing allotment gardeners but also for young couples with children.

Allotment gardeners are working to transform their sites in order to make them even better suited to the needs of children and young families.

Stimulate the senses

First of all, each of a child's five senses are stimulated in the garden. In fact, the experiences found in nature and, more specifically, in the garden are vital for the child's development, as they discover shapes, smells, tastes and colors. They also stimulate the five senses of sight, smell, sound, touch and taste, capacities which are continually declining, or at least are used less and in a very limited respect in everyday life, even though they are fundamental to the child's development. A more varied lifestyle promotes the healthy development of a child. In this way the community, which in spite of everything is a constant source of new stimulations, is of great importance. As well as being a wealth of experience close to nature, the allotments offer all this on a personal level. Nowadays, often the only place that children have to play games and have adventures is in the allotment garden associations.

The allotment garden associations create real cultural bases at the heart of their sites. Apart from playgrounds, they offer possibilities such as puppet shows, an introduction to animals, a story-time corner, all of which can teach children to respect nature and the environment.

Learning discipline and patience

Bearing in mind that our world is often so hectic, it is important that children see and appreciate the allotment gardens as an oasis of tranquility. Gardens encourage us to work with them; we make them yet we also draw inspiration from them. We commit ourselves to them in a relationship built to last. The garden requires a certain type of discipline, we have to take care of it, even when we may not particularly want to. In this sense, the garden constitutes a training ground for our senses of discipline, patience and staying power, which form important landmarks in the character development of children and teenagers.

Another key element in our work together is to ensure the durability of our allotment garden sites, to make sure that young families join our associations, which is essential for the survival of our allotment and leisure gardens.

Some examples:

Mr and Mrs S. and their daughter Bettina are now happily using an allotment garden plot in Dresden, Germany, and in doing so are realizing a long held dream. Little Bettina can enjoy nature first hand: playing in the sand pit, splashing in the paddling pool, picking flowers and soon she could even enjoy planting her own radishes and carrots in her little vegetable patch. Likewise, Mr and Mrs H. and their two children enjoy their garden on an almost daily basis. The children enjoy playing in the garden, nibbling on freshly picked berries and making the most of nature. For the time being, Mum is on parental leave,

and before that she was unemployed, and once that finishes, it is unlikely that the circumstances will have changed much. In these sorts of situations, the garden is a welcome diversion.

Gardening is not the sole interest here. The allotment garden association is also the perfect place for parties: the first day of school with its surprise of sweets, a child's birthday together with a cup of coffee and a slice of home cooked cake, the procession of Chinese lanterns and parties with a more "disco" vibe. All of the above promote community spirit and a friendly environment.

Become sensitive to nature

During the international seminar at Warsaw, each of the represented countries explored this topic, and representatives of allotment garden associations voiced various suggestions and ideas for activities centred around children and teenagers.

Using the slogan "become sensitive to nature", it is principally the groups and associations of allotment gardens, which support the projects and activities, thanks to which young people can become involved in the gardens and experience the pleasures of gardening.

In this respect, work in school gardens is a core activity. We have undertaken the maintenance of the existing gardens, whilst also developing new school gardens.

Each of the European allotment and leisure garden associations looks after a school garden, although the level of importance can vary between countries. These different priorities can even be seen within Germany. In the "Land" Saxe-Anhalt, for example, the "school garden" courses are a firm part of the school program, but in all the other "Länder", it is merely a voluntary option for students.

As a result, in the free state of Saxony, there are already 324 schools with a newly developed school garden, and there are also a considerable number of school gardens situated within the allotment garden sites. As we can see from the enthusiasm with which school children learn about gardening and nature, once the school garden has been set up, thanks to the support of allotment gardeners and parents, it is impossible to imagine community life without these gardens.

In Austria, the law certifies allotment and leisure gardens as public green areas. Consequently, the federation has created and developed school gardens as well as gardens specifically designed for the handicapped, and this is the best way to help children and teenagers learn to love nature.

We feel it is the right time to motivate our children's interest in gardening, which, in addition, is furthering the aims of our movement. In fact, another key point is the increasing age of our allotment gardeners. We must start to set up children's games and field days as soon as possible. The making of gifts for Mothers' Day has also been a real success with the children, and the organisation of such events has been taken care of by the parents. We could ask ourselves what other schemes could still be put into place to stimulate children's interest in nature and the environment. The following suggestions were offered: children should be able to watch the emergence of a dragonfly from its cocoon, or the development of a frog.

Likewise, afternoons dedicated to DIY to make nest boxes and insect habitats have proved to be equally constructive.

In Poland, an art teacher and her students carried out a project in direct contact with nature in the allotment gardens. Practical educational activities, such as DIY and art, have been adopted to help teach children and teenagers in the allotment gardens.

The organisation of children and teenagers' open-air events with music groups and other activities, are just as conducive to an education, which promotes the respect of nature and the environment.

Various agreements have been struck with primary schools and allotment garden associations in order to:

1. Teach children about nature
2. Allow more elderly allotment gardeners to benefit from the help of younger people
3. Make the most of school gardens.

As part of scout club outings, children spend more than a fortnight in a holiday camp studying environmental topics.

In Luxembourg, the federation is composed of allotment garden associations and amateur gardeners. Activities for children and teenagers focus specifically on work in gardens near to the family home, which are used as much by children as by adults.

One would do well to imitate many of the examples mentioned above, as this development is an exercise that can only prove to be beneficial for the future.

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