

Study session in Birmingham

From August 26th till August 28th the delegates of the 3.000.000 affiliated families of allotment gardeners dealt with the future of allotment gardens.

The subject on the physical lay-out of the sites as well as the problems: “who is the future allotment gardener” and “how can the movement comply with his needs” were discussed.

Read below the summary of the workshops and the conclusions of the meeting:

Summary of the German-speaking workshop: The layout and design of sustainable allotments

Five countries, five different situations: in Birmingham, participants from Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Germany discussed their ideas for sustainable allotment gardens within an urban context.

It was clear from the introductory presentation that even in these five neighbouring and 'linguistically related' countries, we are working from different starting points, under different conditions and according to different laws. The first step was to establish what these national allotment garden movements have in common. It became apparent that:

- after some years of reduced activity, there is now a growing need for small garden sites near people's homes;
- at a time when people are becoming more health-conscious, allotments are being increasingly used to produce healthy fruit, vegetables and herbs;
- allotments are being used by city dwellers with stressful lives as places where they can relax, indulge in meaningful leisure activities and meet other people;
- people make particularly good use of their allotments if they are able to reach them quickly on foot or by bicycle.

The participants all agreed that, with a few exceptions, the offer of allotments is largely adequate, and that mostly families, singles and senior citizens of various nationalities, some of them on low incomes, will be particularly glad to have allotments if they are situated near where they live. Nevertheless, as developers are eager to see allotment areas near the inner cities put on the property market, the very existence of allotments that are not protected under building law is under threat in attractive locations.

So what should the allotment garden site of the future look like in order to meet all these expectations? Can we work with innovative models, copying the automotive industry for example, making people want an allotment, creating new enthusiasts? What jobs will be required of allotment organisation managers in the future?

Securing allotment land

Allotment garden sites must be an essential integral part of the city of the future. Their very existence must be secured under building law. The most important task, besides that of setting up new tailor-made allotments near

blocks of flats, is the securing of existing allotment sites. It is important to give all citizens access to allotments, and to make them so attractive that local people would no longer want to be without the 'allotment park' on their doorstep. The integration of allotments into the public green spaces in a city makes people become more positive about the society they live in, which, in the long term, can make administration and politics hold allotments in higher esteem.

Existing allotments turning into 'garden parks'

There are very many different ways in which allotments can be turned into essential elements of public green spaces. Simple measures can be introduced, like opening gates, building safe paths through the site and, where possible, separate cycle paths, all of which will make the public readier to accept allotments: people will use the paths through the allotments to get to their nearest shopping centre, children will pass through them on their way to school, mothers will push their prams here and senior citizens will wheel their walkers – for a safe and relaxing walk. Seasonal highlights, such as gardens of roses or heather or beekeeper's gardens alongside the paths will render the gardens even more attractive and pleasant for walks. Grassy areas between the allotments, given over to playgrounds and picnic or seating areas, will allow the public to use them on a daily basis; people will find a daily visit to the allotments essential for their well-being. If there are any clubhouses in the grounds, they could be developed as neighbourhood community centres.

Upgrading of existing allotments

When we look at the demographic and other social changes that are forecast for our populations, we can see that it will be a good thing if well-established allotments extend the range of what they have to offer. Innovative model gardens that specifically target new user groups can offer a greater variety of opportunities. For example, there might be very small plots for beginner gardeners, or plots of various different sizes, gardens specially designed for the disabled or the elderly, gardens modelled on community gardens that are for common use; there might also be gardens for short-time rental, aiming at introducing new groups of users to allotment gardening. It might be possible to increase variety and arouse people's interest by offering a range of unusual garden sheds, custom-tailored to the particular gardener's needs and published in a shed catalogue.

Setting up organic gardens

People are health-conscious nowadays, which means that organic products are very popular. Organic allotments are an excellent way of enabling people to experience and understand nature, to grow healthy fruit and vegetables as an antidote to the dust, noise and heat of the city. Paths that allow rainwater to seep through and the use of natural materials will mean that less ground is sealed or covered with structure. New allotment areas should also promote the use of renewable energies, like wind and sun. People who are new to gardening could be given advice by experienced gardeners on how to garden organically, on soil protection, on how to encourage micro-organisms in the soil and on water conservation; all these things form the basis for organic gardening and they teach people to treat natural resources with respect. Beekeeper's gardens and areas for small, native animals give people insight into the way in which the natural world is linked, in a world that is trying to exclude nature.

Networking

The organisations and existing structures in a city neighbourhood must practise networking and integration, as a step towards their integration into the city of the future. A co-operation with schools, kindergartens and homes for the elderly is appreciated by the people living in this specific area and strengthens the social interaction. As traditional structures are increasingly being abolished, it will become more and more important for people to get to know and understand each other, to offer their services to their fellow citizens and to accept support from others. The allotment garden movement can thus play a positive role in integration.

Conclusion:

The future will not be easy. It will only be possible to build a lasting, solid foundation for secure and reliable integration into the "city of the future" if all persons involved, and all those responsible, change their way of thinking, if they open up and seek common ground with the people in their city neighbourhood. This will involve:

- integration of allotment areas into a neighbourhood in a way that makes good planning sense and secures their existence of allotments under building law;
- co-operation with politicians, administrations and citizens; provision of information; frank discussions; more publicity campaigns;
- innovative models for allotments;

- establishing contacts with schools, kindergartens, homes for the elderly and other social institutions; networking;
- educating new allotment gardeners and persons responsible; training and passing on of experienced gardeners' wisdom (body project);
- making honorary work more attractive; attracting more people to take up an honorary office.

This is the only way we can succeed, not only in working out our visions for the future, but also in making them come true – despite the present shortage of funds.

Marianne Genenger-Hein

GF Landesverband Rheinland der Gartenfreunde e.V. [Rhineland Association for Allotment Gardens]

Summary of the English speaking workshop: “The lay-out and design of sustainable allotments”

Allotment gardens have always been an answer to certain social needs and expectations. Therefore it is crucial to recognize what are the present social needs and expectations, as well as to identify the political, legal, urban, economical and environmental landscape surrounding allotment gardens. We should look outside our federations for inspiration.

It is absolutely vital for our movement to secure the land which serves allotment gardens. We also must preserve the existing garden sites. These should be the main goals for all federations.

In many countries there is a growing demand for allotments, especially in the cities. Thus we should remind the authorities of their importance and show them all of the benefits of the allotment gardens, and convince them to give land for allotment purposes. We seem to be too shy in these matters.

There is an obvious need to show what are the accomplishments and achievements of the allotment garden movement. We must initiate more innovative projects to show the achievements and potential of the allotment movement and also to attract new people to the gardens. It is necessary to educate the local authorities and engage the public.

It is also significant to develop a partnership with the authorities, because gardens are an essential part of the cities and communities, they are public equipments serving everyone. We must share these gardens with the communities and interact more. Therefore it is necessary to unlock the gates and open the gardens. Allotment gardens are a community within a community.

There is a need to change our image, change the “face” of allotment gardens. We should sell the successes of the allotment movement, especially by expanding our activity towards the media.

Considering the lay-out of future allotment gardens, we must initially identify the basic needs, goals and expectations of the people most likely to take up an allotment. Only then can we develop and arrange fitting gardens that will suit future gardeners.

There is a vast variety of allotment gardens we have on offer:

- Traditional gardens;
- Leisure gardens;
- Community gardens.

It all depends on the needs of the public as well as on the existing conditions and possibilities.

The unity of our movement is essential. The international allotment community and national federations must be unified. We should be more active in presenting our case to national and European authorities and should strive to persuade EU institutions to pass a law concerning allotment gardens.

The particular national federations differ in many aspects , however the European allotment community also shares many common problems. Two elements apply everywhere:

- Gardens must be sustainable, thus they must be run according to ecological principles, which will permit the allotments to have a strong position in society;
- Good neighbour ship is vital, therefore we must be open and friendly to local communities.

Finally, it is very important that we perceive the national federations and the International Office as guardians of the allotment movement and therefore it should be our responsibility to undertake all possible steps in order to maintain allotment gardens all across Europe for future generations.

Tomasz Terlecki
Polish Allotment Federation

**Summary of the German speaking workshop:
„Future allotment gardener“**

1. We have to open our allotment gardens, not only on a spatial level, but also on an intellectual and spiritual level. Only with such an opening can there be an acceptance from and for society. This could be achieved by inviting different groups (e.g. children, old people, handicapped people, etc.) to work together with us.
2. We have to make sure that our movement stays attractive! This could be achieved by creating and accepting free spaces for our members to unfurl. Therefore it is necessary to get rid of too strict restrictions and to encourage and accept creativity.
3. We have to exemplify our values to future generations of allotment gardeners through our own lives to keep our movement alive.
4. We have to increase our efforts to find volunteers. Ideally these people will come from our own associations. Except for one league we all agreed that we have to stay flexible for the recruitment of new board members. The case could arise where board members can not be found inside our own association. In this case there could be the necessity to look beyond our borders and try to find external volunteers who are willing to participate.

Sylvia WOHATSCHEK
Austrian allotment garden federation

**Summary of the English speaking workshop:
Who is the future allotment gardener?**

Concerning the future gardener we agree on:

- An increasing interest in organic/ecological gardening and in pioneering with sustainable developments like solar energy, wind energy, use of water, compost toilets;
- Women as a more conscious driving force. They are often more interested in organic gardening (raising their children in a healthy way);
- The need for more comfort, which can differ from toilets in community buildings to more comfort in garden houses;
- An increasing interest from all social levels (students, artists, professionals using the allotment as an undisturbed retreat and working place);
- That the integration of disabled/restricted, immigrants/ethnic minorities may be further in the allotment societies than in society in general;
- That there are still sufficient people willing to take responsibility (but we must scout, catch and educate them);
- That there are more and more people with an interest in nature conservation (promoting and protecting rare species, beehives on allotment sites);
- That there are people who still remember the origin: allotments started as means to feed a family and people willing to share with the poor;
- Future allotment gardeners being ambitious proactive people – proud to tell about our position.

Chris ZIJDEVELD
President of the Dutch allotment garden federation

Conclusions of the study session

During the last two days we have heard very interesting lectures and have discussed different questions, all of which were in fact based on two central requirements: The need to consider the evolution of our society and the need to create a positive public image of our movement.

It is necessary to polish our image to create and to present a movement that is contemporary, innovative and compelling in its commitment to serve the citizens, the city and nature.

Confronted with the necessity to find answers to the questions enounced as topics of our study session, it is essential that, first of all, we work in every country to acquire or to maintain the legal protection of our allotment gardens. This is our basis we have aimed at since our foundation, a *conditio sine qua non* for the future of allotment gardens. This conclusion of the seminar in Ghent was confirmed here in Birmingham.

Secondly, we have then as both Hervé BONNAVAUD and Mogens GINNERUP-NIELSEN pointed out, to consider the evolution as well as the needs and problems of our society. This is necessary, in order to create favourable conditions for our members and to prepare our movement for the future.

Our discussions of the two topics assigned to us have to be considered in the light of these elements.

I) Who will be the future allotment gardener? How can the allotment gardens meet the requirements of the future generations?

The résumés presented showed that we have to determine and analyse the evolution of society which will influence the answer to the question: who will be a future allotment gardener. Among others:

- We acknowledged differences between the goals persued by the member gardeners and the vast range of categories of people member in our associations;
- We realized that there are more and more women in our allotment gardens;
- We considered the work stress and the mobility of young people;
- We saw the numerous contrasts between countries and the national legal restrictions.

We have then to analyse the consequences of this evolution and of these problems on the allotment gardens in order to create a movement:

- that is compelling to the members;
- that is adapted to the members (women; singles; elderly people);
- that is adapted to the people assuming a function in the movement (problems: work stress, burden of voluntary work);
- that is appreciated by the neighbourhood.

All this leads to one central requirement: flexibility and open-mindedness

II) The second topic discussed was: How should the allotment garden sites be laid out?

The taking into consideration of the answer to the question of who will be the future allotment gardeners and what are their needs influences the lay-out of the gardens.

The answers, however, vary because of the different national situations and the different national legislations.

Nevertheless one can acknowledge that as a consequence:

- We have to present the largest possible offer of gardens: ranging from vegetable gardens to leisure gardens, gardens with and without shed, gardens with more or less small huts, gardens situated near where the people live;
- There has to be free space enabling the allotment gardeners to develop their creativity;
- One has proposed a catalogue of sheds where fantasy is allowed. The use of renewable energies should be possible;
- The gardens should stimulate ecology and the respect of nature;
- The sites have to be opened to the neighbours and the associative home should as well welcome the neighbours under certain conditions;
- Partnerships should be concluded (with elderly people's home, disabled people, schools etc.) All these people should be welcome on our sites and have a plot there;
- Plots should be varied and attractive and make people walking through the sites discover varied aspects and enjoy their walks through it;
- We should help young people (tutor) so that gardening will become a success for them.

These facts all lead to one requirement: remain or become leader in this matter; remain or become a qualified partner of the authorities; be or become better/ the best of those who offer plots.

These subjects we have discussed during our study session are very important, but they are not exhaustive. Two other problems that we have started to discuss have to be dealt with during our next meetings.

In fact in order to create the required positive image towards the town authorities and the public we have to increase our efforts in effective public relations. We have to boost the visibility of allotment gardens through all possible means. The very interesting innovative projects presented during our study session are a good start and should motivate all our members. We have to contact and be present in all media.

We then have to create the appropriate conditions so that members are again ready to assume a function on our boards. The problem of voluntary work has to be discussed and solutions have to be found.

Dear delegates,

All these topics: legal security, evaluation of the general problems of our society, determining the needs of future generations, answers concerning the lay-out, launching innovative projects for allotments and increasing the visibility of allotments are closely linked together.

I invite you all to discuss these questions in your federation in order to prepare our next international congress and above all to prepare a successful common future. We therefore have to underline the many things we have in common before looking at our differences.

I invite the persons having presided the workshops to send me the written conclusions as quickly as possible so that they can be published and that all our affiliated members can use our work.

I know that our international president is going to thank our hosts, but as this study session has been so successful, getting thanks twice will not be disproportioned.

Therefore I would not like to end before having, on my behalf, warmly thanked the English federation for hosting this event, for all the efforts they have made to prepare a successful study session, especially considering in which conditions Donna had to take up this work. I also would like to thank the lecturers, the persons having presided the workshops as well as their secretaries for their personal engagement and finally to thank all of you for your ideas, your input and your fellowship during the last two days.

Malou WEIRICH
Secretary general