



FACT SHEET FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Evolution of Community Gardens Over Time

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of the history of community gardens, as it is plausible that the first gardens in the world were collective, considering how prehistoric communities were organized. In any case, the phenomenon of community gardens, as we understand them today, paradoxically emerged thanks to industrialization in the 19th century. Cultivation in cities has been a reality accompanying humans since their world assumed urban characteristics, alternating throughout history between a productive vocation, that of the garden, and a recreational one, the garden as a place of rest and "respite" from the rest of the world.

The 1800s, characterized by the advent of the industrial revolution, had consequences such as overcrowding of cities, loss of free spaces, and the formation of ghettos and slums. The social need and demand for "health," for new recreational spaces for the city, grew in response to the industrial city's indifference to the darkness and dirt it generated. New common representations recognized green space as having important social value.

In this context, the urban public park replaced gardens and established itself as sanitary, educational, and relaxing. The philanthropic housing construction of the 19th century promoted the establishment of gardens and vegetable plots in working-class neighborhoods, as gardening was considered an activity suitable for teaching diligence and the sense of family: a return to ancient civil virtues that urban individualism had overwhelmed and corrupted.

In Western Europe and the United Kingdom, the first community gardens began to appear between the 1820s and 1830s when various urban areas were allocated to city workers. These workers, not enjoying good economic conditions, found in cultivating the land (which consisted of unused plots) an additional means of family sustenance, an activity they were well versed in since most of them came from rural backgrounds. According to a study by the University of Missouri, similar measures were taken in 1890 in the United States to help unemployed workers. Silvio Crespi, a Lombard cotton industrialist, stated: "The garden is the most effective of medicines for treating occupational diseases, especially rickets." Thus, new working-class villages began to form around the edges of cities throughout Europe, defining new districts around them. Krupp, a prominent German industrialist, wrote: "I believe it is economically and morally very useful to convince workers' families to cultivate the garden." From 1872 onwards, he equipped workers' homes with an individual garden. For industrialists, it appeared to be good physical activity in the open air, necessary after many hours of work in the closed factory environment, but primarily a healthy activity that kept the worker away from possible political involvement or common initiatives against the employer.



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W.H. Lever, an English soap industrialist, created a complex for the settlement of workers at his factory in Port Sunlight (near Liverpool) and expanded it in 1912 to include extensive allotments: gardens and vegetable plots that constituted the back of the house. The idea of surrounding workers' houses with green spaces and equipping them with gardens and vegetable plots became a necessity, and every European country has its own specific history in this regard.

An additional increase in land area allocated to collective agriculture occurred in Europe during the post-World War I period. In Germany, where the situation had become unsustainable, laws were enacted in 1919 to promote the birth of urban agricultural realities throughout the country. Meanwhile, in Russia, where the Bolsheviks had taken power, many lands were nationalized and allocated to the working class and party officials.

In England, the experience of working-class gardens between the 19th and 20th centuries spread beyond the reality of industrial settlements and prompted previously inert governments to create "family gardens." However, even in May 1996, there was an explicit request for "green," when about 500 activists affiliated with "The Land is Ours" occupied about 13 acres of abandoned land belonging to Guinness on the banks of the Thames in Wandsworth, south London. Their action aimed to highlight what they described as "the terrifying waste of urban land, the lack of public housing, and the deterioration of the urban environment." Today, in Great Britain, the "National Trust," which manages the cultural heritage of the United Kingdom, has made available to citizens a thousand plots of land capable of producing 2.6 million heads of lettuce. Even Queen Elizabeth II of England authorized the creation of a garden within the walls of Buckingham Palace in 2009 (for the first time since World War II) for the pleasure of direct harvesting: "In the garden, covering an area of ten meters by four, plants at risk of extinction such as a particular species of climbing beans, onions, leeks, and carrots have been sown, used in the palace kitchens."

In Germany, urban gardens began to spread only at the end of the 19th century as a shock strategy to the phenomena of progressive urban industrialization. During these years, the work of Moritz Schreber, a physician and lecturer oriented towards promoting a better state of public health, stood out: he proved how simple daily exercises in the open air could extraordinarily improve a person's health. The contribution of such studies boosted the extension of the small garden phenomenon. With the economic crisis of 1930, more spaces were reclaimed and allocated to cultivation to support the citizens' needs, given the government's significant limitations in meeting their needs. The gardens were named "schrebergarten" (in honor of Dr. Schreber) and rapidly multiplied in Austria and Switzerland under the name "gartenfreund" (friendly garden). These small gardens once again ensured food security during the two World Wars when communications between cities were challenging. People cultivated in private gardens and assigned plots, as well as on the bombed ruins of the Reichstag, the seat of the German Parliament.



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In July 1919, a year after the end of World War I, a first regulation was approved for the division into plots and the methods of allocation of gardens to citizens.

France was an excellent adoptive home for urban gardens, primarily through the "jardins ouvriers" (workers' gardens) made available by municipal administrations. The echo of Dr. Schreber's work combined with that of Monsignor Jules Lemire, a man of the church, professor, and politician, promoted the creation of institutions and associations for the protection of the poorest classes in the ownership of assets, including houses and gardens. The intent was strongly pedagogical to bring workers closer to the sense of work and family, keeping them away from phenomena like alcoholism, which was rampant at the time. Today in France, many examples of public parks and gardens include "jardins familiaux" (family gardens). Common spaces in family gardens become real public places frequented by gardeners and neighborhood residents. The objectives are to create a local community and stimulate children to reconnect with the land, discovering work and respect for others.

The United States has never been a stranger to the phenomenon. Starting at the end of the 19th century, central and local governments supported the expansion of community gardens, created in so-called "vacant lots" in urban areas, primarily in degraded neighborhoods. Again, the need for governments was to put disadvantaged social classes in a position to autonomously sustain themselves in the face of the country's economic crisis. Numerous movements arose in New York, which were also assigned an additional task: "do everything possible and accept every sacrifice to send provisions to the fighting forces." Since 1917, a series of propaganda actions reiterated: "do your bit: help your country and yourself by raising your own vegetables." This slogan aimed to involve citizens in reducing pressure on public supplies while simultaneously manifesting a broader political project to temporarily solve high unemployment and poverty rates. The plots, although optimized, were again abandoned at the end of the crisis period when "governments suspended subsidies, attracted by more profitable real estate market developments despite the poor classes' needs remaining unchanged."

To address the severe situation resulting from World War I's immense demand for resources, the United States promoted the creation of new community gardens and financed an education campaign through the "United States School Garden Army" program. But it was during the Great Depression of the 1930s that collective agriculture saved many Americans from hunger through the establishment of what were called "relief gardens" or "welfare garden plots." These not only allowed many families to survive but also became real socialization places where participants who would otherwise have been unemployed and hopeless could feel more important and useful to their families and society. Thus, community gardens began to demonstrate their social potential alongside their economic one. According to data from the University of Missouri, in 1934, more than 23 million families participated in these programs, producing a total harvest value estimated at about \$36 million.



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If during the Depression years, community gardening had saved many families from hunger and had begun to reveal its social potential, it was no less significant in the following years. World War II was also a significant period for collective gardens: it was during these years that the "Victory Gardens" boom occurred. Already used as a resource during World War I, they became famous during the second conflict, thanks to strong government campaigns urging citizens to self-produce food. Public resources were primarily allocated to military supplies, and the demand for food among civilians and military personnel was considerable. There was no choice but to encourage collective cultivation to compensate for this shortage. Famous posters of the time, such as the British "Dig On For Victory" and the American "Your victory garden counts more than ever," emphasized this. Victory gardens sprang up in courtyards, on rooftops, and in public spaces such as "San Francisco City Hall" and "Boston Common." It is estimated that about 20 million Americans worked the land, producing more than 40% of the national vegetable needs each year.

After the war, there was a sort of "pause" with few thinking about collective gardens, while many focused on economic growth, a common goal more or less throughout the Western world. As a result, the tools remained in the storeroom for about 25 years until the 1970s. The abandonment and, therefore, the greater availability of urban land, coupled with rising inflation and the need to rediscover neighborly socialization, produced a new significant growth in community gardening. And not only in America, according to the ACT Planning and Land Authority, an Australian government agency, the first collective garden in that state dates back to 1977 in Nunawading, a precursor to other gardens born the same year in Melbourne and Brunswick. As for Europe, the decline of collective gardens continued during those years until today.

A new community garden movement emerged in the 1970s, particularly in New York. In this city, the economic crisis of the 1970s, with a very high unemployment rate and rising energy and real estate prices, led to the abandonment of many dilapidated buildings by their owners, who left the city. Naturally, the municipality did not have the means to maintain them, so this real estate heritage quickly turned into a collection of "terrains vagues" as many buildings were demolished. In a context of abandonment and degraded spaces, artist Liz Christy, noticing the lack of green spaces, especially in poorer neighborhoods, had the idea of starting to throw so-called "seed bombs" over the fences of these abandoned spaces. Other interventions, such as planting trees and flowers in small interstitial spaces or painting ivy on some buildings' facades, began to spread through the city until an initial group of activists became large enough to engage in larger spaces. This is how the "green guerrillas" movement was born. The founding group, later established as an association, guided more by passion for humans than plants, still encourages people of all ages and cultures to come together to create these "community gardens." Particularly numerous in the Losada neighborhood, where a multicultural and marginalized community of immigrants lived, these gardens stand out for their use of recycled materials in space arrangements and the inclusion of typical elements of Puerto



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Rican culture, the most represented in the neighborhood. After years of activism, the New York City government recognized the consistency of such practices and developed a program to support them. These gardens, which have existed for over 30 years, have transformed over time with the arrival of the middle class in the neighborhood in the 1980s, leading to gentrification and the replacement of old immigrant communities by groups of educated white Americans. The most visible spatial sign of this transformation is the shift from old arrangements with recycled materials to purchased garden furniture. Inspired by the American experience, a new urban garden movement emerged in Europe, closely linked to urban and economic models. Urban agriculture is practiced worldwide for subsistence by over 800 million people. Since the early 21st century, it has spread to rich countries, particularly in Europe. In France, Germany, England, and Northern Europe, the practice of "urban gardens" has a relatively recent history, paralleling that of Italy. London, Paris, and Berlin host national associations of "family gardens," and for decades, consumer associations and public administration entities have organized available plots and offered services to urban garden operators. In Italy, entire settlements of illegal gardens have sometimes been replaced by small plots allocated according to very selective rankings, without meeting the real demand and with significant landscape or logistical problems. However, more and more municipalities are making these plots available, especially to retirees. The first Italian regulation of municipal social gardens was drafted in Modena in 1980. It officially recognized the social and economic role of horticultural activity in the city. Since 2000, the phenomenon of shared gardens and gardens has involved almost all major Italian cities. By 2009-2015, over 160 such realities had already been counted in Rome. This new development phase coincides with the recessionary crisis, confirming the role of agriculture in the city in supporting the economy. Above all, shared gardens and gardens are characterized as spontaneous phenomena linked to the need to occupy abandoned and often degraded urban green areas, which are ideal conditions for real estate speculation. Another important motivation is the need to develop social moments linked to the environment, with citizens actively managing their territory.

Especially around 2010, guerrilla gardening practices also spread in Italy: a movement born from a group of young Milanese who follow and advise independent groups to transform and reclaim "sterile and impersonal common urban spaces." The first "attack" of the Turin group "Badili Badola," born on the Internet, dates back to December 13, 2007, on a flowerbed in Piazza Baldissera in Turin, near the Dora station. The group of Roman guerrilla gardeners was born in 2010, "attacking" many degraded points in the city, not excluding the transition from these practices to the birth of stable gardens. In Italy, the practice of urban gardens has remained marginalized or ignored for decades. In the last decade, Istat data released by Coldiretti have 'photographed' the phenomenon, revealing that 33 million square meters of municipal-owned land have been divided into small plots used for 'urban gardens,' that is, for domestic cultivation, the planting of gardens, and recreational gardening. In 2013, 'urban gardens' in Italy



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tripled compared to 2011. Effects of the crisis? Not only. In reality, urban gardens in Italy have also been created by administrations for educational and recreational purposes. Moreover, urban agriculture is also practiced by many private individuals, who increasingly create domestic gardens on balconies, terraces, and even inside homes. The decorative use of vegetable plants arranged artfully in flowerbeds or on the walls of living rooms and corridors becomes a decoration, message, and symbol of a lifestyle that seeks to integrate nature into urban daily life. Therefore, not only the crisis. Or rather, not only the strictly economic aspects of the crisis: what favors the growth of urban agriculture and urban gardens is the desire to return to nature, typical of phases of moral crisis and cultural rebirth. According to Istat, in 2013, 57 administrations activated urban gardens for citizens to manage. Maximum levels in the North with 81% of the cities involved (in addition to Turin, significant surfaces are also dedicated to Bologna and Parma, both around 155 thousand square meters). Almost two out of three provincial capitals in Central Italy. In the South, urban gardens are only present in Naples, Andria, Barletta, Palermo, and Nuoro. Coldiretti explains that 'hobby farmers' are young and old, experts, and new enthusiasts who cultivate small family plots, strips of land along railways, parks, and soccer fields, balconies and terraces equipped with pots of various sizes, or small areas with water and tool sheds provided by municipalities in exchange for symbolic rents."



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