



Sowing the Seeds of Change

By making fruit and vegetable gardens available to everyone, the small town of Andernach, Germany, became an international example of urban green space management.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

Community gardens are increasing in popularity, blossoming from a niche hobby into a widespread movement that's transforming cityscapes across the country. In New York City, Brooklyn Grange operates the world's largest rooftop soil farms, spanning almost 5 acres across multiple buildings and producing more than 80,000 pounds of organically grown vegetables each year. In Colorado, Denver Urban Gardens stewards about 200 community gardens and food forests across seven counties, providing fresh, healthy produce to underserved populations. And in Detroit, the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative has produced and distributed more than 50,000 pounds of organic produce to about 2,000 households since the project began 15 years ago.

While these programs create green spaces and provide free or low-cost food, they're just a small segment of the downtown landscape.

Now imagine an entire town where fruits and vegetables grow throughout the streets. A place where anyone can open their door and pick fresh produce, free of charge. A veritable WonkaLand of berries, nuts, herbs, legumes, leafy greens, and even edible blooms. Welcome to Andernach, Germany, the world's first "edible city,"

In 2010 — the International Year of Biodiversity — the small town of about 30,000 residents on the left bank of the Rhine river, took a bold gamble: It turned its public parks into a free open-air grocery store, replacing ornamental flowers and unused lawns with lush gardens filled with edible produce that anyone can harvest for free. The goal was simple: to make biodiversity and food production visible and tangible in public spaces and to get residents more engaged in their community. Today, the town is a model of urban agriculture that has inspired similar undertakings in other destinations across Europe, Africa, and South America.

PICKING ALLOWED

The project began with tomatoes. The city planted 101 varieties of the juicy red salad staple, highlighting the importance of biodiversity in the city center. Each year since, a different edible plant has been the focus: 2011 showcased 100 types of beans, 2012 was 20 onion varieties, and 2013 was the year of the cabbage.

"This year, the focus is on fruit," says Jonas Gesell, head of environment and sustainability for the Andernach city administration. "For example, apple espaliers have been placed on the market square, berry bushes have been integrated into existing beds and raised beds, and mobile fruit trees are being placed on sealed surfaces in the city center. The idea is to bring more greenery, shade, and edible plants into areas where traditional tree planting is often difficult.

"In the beginning, there was some skepticism, and people first had to understand that they were really allowed to harvest from public beds," Gesell adds. "Today, however, residents appreciate the gardens, stop to look at the plants, talk to the gardeners, and harvest fruits, vegetables, or herbs when they're ripe."



In addition to the annual featured produce, crops include zucchini, lettuce, beans, onions, pumpkins, and berries. Fruit trees include apples, pears, quinces, Mirabelle plums, cherries, and peaches. There are even more climate-adapted species, such as figs, persimmons, bitter oranges, kiwis, Indian bananas, almonds, and chokecherries. No pesticides are used, and the edible plants are interspersed with pollinator- and bird-friendly blooms and seed-bearing flora.

Signs stating “Picking Allowed” are scattered around the town, encouraging residents and visitors to grab an apple, pull a carrot, or twist off a plump strawberry. A “traffic-light”

system of colored cards placed in the beds announce when the crops are ready to harvest. Red means “not ready for harvest,” yellow is “harvest only if very hungry,” and green signifies “ready for harvest.”

Gesell notes, “For tourists, the gardens are part of the overall experience of the city center, especially because the edible areas are integrated in public spaces rather than being located in one separate garden.”

Photos by 90Grad Photography - Hilger & Schneider GbR

According to Gesell, the project has developed into a broader concept of sustainable urban green space management. It combines biodiversity, climate adaptation, environmental education, urban agriculture, public space quality, and social aspects. While raised beds, fruit trees, and other edible offerings are scattered throughout the city, the most visible areas are located in the city center and along the medieval city wall. About 2 acres along the walls are planted with leafy greens, root vegetables, table grapes, brassicas, and nuts. Another acre in the Historic Garden is planted exclusively with medicinal herbs, heirloom crops common to the Roman diet, and grapevines.

These plots are complemented by a community garden on the outskirts of the city and a 34-acre permaculture garden outside of the city where rare breeds of livestock such as a Coburg fox sheep and saddleback pigs are reared. Chickens are raised for their eggs, and bees make up to 90 pounds of honey a year. These products are sold in a shop in the city center.



CIVIC PRIDE

Andernach's "edible city" program isn't just a horticulture initiative — it's a social initiative, as well. The program is managed by Perspektive gGmbH, a local nonprofit that offers employment and training opportunities for socially disadvantaged individuals and those with mental health conditions. Professional gardeners from the town's urban planning office oversee the project, and they are assisted by workers referred by Perspektive. The project also provides opportunities to educate people about nutrition and nature. Local primary schools have created their own gardens, which helps to foster a respect for nature and raise awareness of sustainability among young children.

And despite concerns early on about vandalism, "serious vandalism or misuse has remained limited," Gesell explains. "Our experience is that most people are respectful of the areas, especially because they understand that these are useful and valuable public spaces.

"Of course, there have been some challenges in maintaining the gardens," he continues. "The main ones are regular care, watering during hot and dry periods, choosing the right plants for each location, soil quality, and dealing with the fact that public spaces are used in many ways. Some fruits are occasionally harvested too early, and in some areas, animals, such as geese, can also be a challenge."

In 2018, Andernach joined the Edible Cities Network, an EU-funded project that ran until 2023. Member cities were encouraged to exchange experiences and lessons learned with each other. It also assisted municipalities that wanted to develop their own edible programs. Fifteen years after it implemented its edible initiative, Andernach continues to attract attention from municipalities and environmental organizations regarding replicating this approach to urban gardening elsewhere. Gesell notes that upward of 100 guided research tours of the gardens take place each year as interest in the project continues to spread.

"I would definitely recommend this program to other



cities," he says. "The basic idea is very transferable: public green spaces can be more than decorative. They can support biodiversity, make food production visible, create more attractive public spaces, contribute to environmental education, and strengthen people's identification with their city. The key factors are clear responsibilities, long-term maintenance, suitable locations, and the willingness to start with visible pilot projects." 🌿

