For the last twenty years, towns and cities have seen the development of collective gardens, especially as part of urban policy, that have taken over from the allotments of the 19th century. Initially designed to allow working-class family to meet their food needs, that new type of garden pursues social, economic, ecological, cultural, and participatory objectives in an original and combinatorial manner. Those gardens conquer the “left behind” of towns and cities, and enable the territory to be appropriated in a new way, involving the inhabitants in building more sustainable cities and in designing new urban landscapes.

**COMMUNITY GARDENS TO REVITALISE NEIGHBOURHOODS AND TERRITORIES**

**HOW CAN A COMMUNITY GARDEN BE DEFINED?**
Community gardens are not a system as such. They are local initiatives borne by associations and municipalities (through neighbourhood associations), and inhabitant collectives, always with singular circumstances to their creation, varied settings, and extremely varied modes of operation. The national network of community gardens, which brings together regional networks that support their development, counts over one thousand of them. Created or facilitated collectively, community gardens aim at developing local social links through social, cultural, and educational activities accessible to the public. One can distinguish family gardens (land that is divided into plots, allocated by local authorities or by associations to individuals who garden there for their own needs and those of their families) and social-inclusion gardens used to encourage the reinsertion of people who are excluded, or who are experiencing social or professional difficulty.

In 2015, as part of city contracts, 254 actions for the benefit of gardens and nature in towns and cities received State help in the amount of 1,000,000 euros.
THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY GARDENS ON SOCIAL TIES: RECEIVED WISDOM?

Community gardens are developing across the whole territory, but many have been established in priority urban-policy neighbourhoods. One of the arguments that is often put forward to explain that passion maintains that community gardens seem to enable social cohesion to be boosted or even created. However, that statement has not been the subject of substantiated work. A study commissioned by the General Commission for Territorial Equality (CGET) allowed it to be verified by field observation of the impact of community gardens on social ties at ten sites.1

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Gardens enable isolated and fragile people to leave their homes and deal with others, but without involving themselves in an overly constraining collective activity. The feeling of “connecting” to the earth through a palpable contact, leading to gratifying production is often cited; it enables genuine personal development, something that can be very strong for some people, in which case one can speak of a therapeutic effect. Gardens appear as very open places that are simple to enter, whilst also being places of refuge that enable people to get involved according to their individual rhythms. Gardens also produce a (re)socialisation effect: taking part in gardens leads to exchanges between gardeners, with facilitators, as well as with spectator-inhabitants and with visitors. The language of gardens remains a universal one.

AN UNDENIABLE MIXING OF PEOPLE... AND PLANTS

Interindividual relationships multiply around exchanges of advice, mutual help, and shared moments, whether to maintain collective plots or to organise festive periods. The inter-generational dimension of gardens is real as regards elderly people and the parents of young children, but young people are rarely present. Gardens welcome people of all social and ethnic origins, which leads to exchanges of practices and of plant varieties alike. A certain “club effect” is observed, as with all community activities, but the effects of competition are not absent; the same is true of micro-conflicts around questions of appropriation and taking over.

AN OASIS TO REJUVENATE THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Gardens embellish and showcase the image of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, who are capable of such an achievement with little means. Moreover, and unlike urban furniture or local public areas, community gardens show few signs of deterioration. On the contrary, they are valued, and locals show them off like a neighbourhood facility, a totem. Depending on their configuration, gardens accommodate neighbourhood structures, retirement homes, schools, and social centres, and they organise festive events. Thus, in Lyon, Le Pré Santy garden organises egg hunts for schools, as well as picnics between the crèche and the retirement home. That window on the neighbourhood boosts the mixing of populations, and can thus contribute to reinforcing social ties in the neighbourhood.

INCREASING PROMOTION AT CITY LEVEL

The garden opening up the quarter and the latter’s influence remain highly dependent on the work of the facilitation structure. However, it is not rare for them to welcome institutional establishments, or for exchanges and visits to be organised across the whole town or city or even beyond, showcasing a territory grid made up of municipal and community gardens that are the subjects of urban tourism, like street-art or heritage circuits.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

Thus, community gardens are particularly effective at bringing isolated and fragile people to a place of socialisation, and to serve as a crucible for the “gradual” development of links. Sometimes, as in Angers, in La Roseraie neighbourhood, the plots at the base of buildings are allocated in order to offer access to family gardens. Conversely, it is a place where the collective dimension cannot be prescribed by activity (one can garden in one’s own corner), and where that collective dimension must be induced by facilitation and by its rules of the game (because, in the end it is a matter of sharing the garden).

To makes those places of collective integration long-lasting is more difficult in social-housing neighbourhoods; it requires sustained, continuous support. Community gardens experience the dynamics and difficulties that are typical of a community activity (variable and often irregular investment, varying levels of involvement, club effect, internal conflicts within the community, etc.), with effects that are exacerbated by the socio-cultural and economic context of urban-policy neighbourhoods.

Gardeners seek contacts with others and they want to garden, but they are neither militants, nor organisers. They do not easily have and they do not often want to take on, a regulatory role with their opposite numbers, who remain residents of a neighbourhood that is all at once closed and pauperised, and where the lack of stable professional activity deprives many people of a solid social foundation. Thus, facilitators are the one who bear the political ambition of gardens. Those facilitators are part of a dynamic community and institutional network; nonetheless, they remain relatively isolated in carrying out those specific, atypical projects, of which the boosting and the security constitute a challenge.
COMMUNITY GARDENS IN THE SERVICE OF THE SUSTAINABLE CITY

In parallel with the real impact of community gardens on people and on social ties, other effects are sought and observed. Gardens enable territories to fight climate change and to adapt to it (greening the city, reabsorbing heat islands, etc.). They help the sense of seasonality to be rediscovered, and the transmission of knowledge needed for food balance. It is a resource site to respond to the challenges of food security, by allowing the production of local fruits and vegetables at lower cost, by connecting to urban-agriculture projects.

Gardens are sources of work and of economic activity. They are used to support people who are distant from work, by taking the form of social-inclusion gardens, and they can facilitate the emergence of new modes of distribution and catering, especially as part of the social and solidarity economy (street food, soup discs, unbelievable foods, green swaps, etc.). They also enable jobs to be created for garden facilitators (future jobs and adult intermediaries).

A NEW WAY OF APPROPRIATING THE TERRITORY

Gardens allow inhabitants to be actors and initiators of a use that is valued by the “left behind”, wastelands and other gap sites in urban centres. Thus, community gardens can become tools for the temporary promotion of land that is awaiting an urban plan (through precarious-occupancy agreements).

COMMUNITY GARDENS AROUND THE WORLD

It was in the USA that community gardens arose, with the Green Guerrilla movement launched by Liz Christy in 1973 to convert wasteland into community gardens and reintroduce biodiversity to Manhattan, then to all the neighbourhoods of New York. Since then the phenomenon has spread to large cities the world over, with stunning layouts, such as in Tokyo, where lack of space means that gardens are cultivated on roofs.

In Europe, those practices first took root in Northern Europe; they are currently found throughout the continent. Thus, in Lisbon, since 2008, the municipality has allocated to 500 families, with job seekers getting priority, plots ranging from 50 to 500 m² and covering a total of 7 hectares. The immediate objective is to supplement insufficient income, whilst improving the quality of food for families, and, by reintroducing urban agriculture, adapting to climate change by increasing the resilience of the capital.

ANGERS, LYON, AND STRASBOURG: FIVE GARDENS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

The study commissioned by the CGET on the impact of community gardens in matters of social ties was carried out on the basis of 10 gardens set “at the foot of buildings” in neighbourhoods within the new priority geography of 8 cities (except Île-de-France).

Jardin de l’Amitié and Jardin des Sources (La Roseraie neighbourhood, Angers (Maine-et-Loire département))
Jardin de l’Amitié, created in 2010: 580 m², including 17 individual plots of 22 m², an educational plot of 25 m², and a collective plot of 67 m². Jardin des Sources, created in 2012: 443 m², including 12 individual plots of 20 m² and an educational plot of 40 m².
Facility: 1 shared shed in each of the gardens.
Users: over 30 gardeners, 2 schools, and 1 association.
Governance: allocation of plots and regulations managed by the neighbourhood association, which provides facilitation through adult intermediaries.

Jardin du Pré Santy (Langlet-Santy neighbourhood, Lyon, Rhône département)
An initial plot of about 220 m² in 2007, then an opportunity to establish a second plot of 550 m² in 2011, operating as “a collective whole”.
Facilities: 1 shared shed on each plot, 1 document base, 1 insect hotel, 1 compost site, rainwater barrels, raised containers, 1 large terrace, and benches.
Users: 20 gardeners, 2 schools, 1 crèche, 1 college, 1 social centre, 1 retirement home.
Governance: project co-constructed with the inhabitants, garden managed by the neighbourhood association.

Jardin de nos Rêves and Jardin en Mélange (Hautepierre neighbourhood, Strasbourg – Bas-Rhin département)
Jardins de nos Rêves: 1st community garden in Strasbourg, created in 2005-2006. It has 5 collective lots and 25 individual plots, including 10 that were truly active at the time of the study.
Jardin en Mélange: opened in 2008. It has 45 individual plots, including 20 that are no longer gardened, and 5 collective plots.
Support: co-ordinator from Éco-conseil (“Jardin dans tous ses états” (“Garden in a bit of a state”) regional network).
Facilities: compost silos, benches, tables, pergola, etc. Works (frescos and mosaics) done by the inhabitants and gardeners with artists during workshops.
It brings about the invention of innovative management of public areas, as it can have developed in the context of local urban management, offering a vision that is shared between elected officials, technical departments, and the inhabitants, and modifying the intervention borders of each.

Thus within a neighbourhood where the PNRQAD\(^3\) programme operates, a community garden in Bagnolet moved to Montreuil, on the other side of the area that is common to the two towns, bringing together new inhabitants, through a precarious-occupancy agreement with the town, on a wasteland plot that was intended for social housing. That garden is due to move to another site when building work starts on the housing, most likely back to the initial plot, which has ended its secondment. In Bordeaux, in the Belcher neighbourhood, a piece of wasteland belonging to a private group and that was used for illegal waste disposal was transformed into a garden of 35 individual plots and 4 collective plots.

Those gardens develop well beyond urban-policy neighbourhoods, but they are particularly numerous in urban-regeneration operations that lead to a moving occupation of areas and land. They enable innovation by giving a new face to urban neighbourhoods where garden areas have their own place.

All those reasons led the CGET to support the emergence of community gardens. Under the former Contrats Urbains de Cohésion Sociale (CUCS – Urban Social-Cohesion contracts), several projects were supported by contracts from urban policy. In 2014, 235 actions were listed representing grants of 920,000 euros, spread across all the strategic strands of the CUCSs: 50% on social ties, 25% on jobs, and 10% on the living environment and the habitat. In 2015, setting up city contracts confirmed that trend. In that renewed context, 254 actions benefited from State aid amounting to 1 million euros in total for garden and nature projects in towns and cities. As in 2014, those actions are spread across the three pillars of city contracts: 146 projects in the social-cohesion pillar (528,630 euros), 70 in the living environment and urban renewal pillar (273,000 euros), and 28 in the economic development and jobs pillar (222,170 euros). That finance, drawn from urban-policy credits, were supplemented to about the same amount, especially by local authorities.

Find out more

Réseau National des Jardins Partagés (National Network of Community Gardens): a national support network for developing community gardens; it brings together regional community networks.

http://www.jardins-partages.org


http://echogeo.revues.org/13702


http://www.hortis.fr

“Si t’es jardin”, a guide to community gardens published by the Comité National de Liaison des Régies de Quarters (CNLRQ – National Liaison Committee for Neighbourhood Associations).

http://www.regiedequartier.org/ressources/guides-thematiques/

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**Figure 1. Communes that received “urban policy” financing for one or more garden-related actions in 2014**


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