

ENVIRONMENT

Edible Cities ©

by Valentine Rinner



Picking your morning apple from a tree in your office's orchard, grabbing fresh eggs at the metro station before heading home or a salad from your apartment's rooftop. Those delights seem quite far from the reality of an urban dweller. However it is becoming less and less unlikely as the past years have seen the emergence of a new trend: urban agriculture.

Urban agriculture is the practice of growing, processing and distributing food in towns, cities and peri-urban areas. It is one of the solutions to increase food security in urban areas faced with a fast-growing population.

From community-based organic agriculture initiatives to industrial hydroponics, from homemade soil containers to city-organized community permaculture gardens, urban agriculture can be carried out in many forms using many different organizational techniques.

Climatic conditions are central in determining the crop varieties and quantities that can be grown, especially concerning soil-bound methods. Other determinant factors are local economic conditions, legislative regulations, cultural habits, etc.. In France, for example urban agriculture practices are mainly based on vegetable and aromatic herb production.

Urban agriculture has been a popular research topic in the past decade especially in Canada and certain parts of the US, but also in Cuba and South Africa. There is now evidence establishing that some cities could easily produce enough fruit and vegetables to meet their population's demands, but also that urban agriculture can provide many social, economic and environmental benefits for both urban and rural populations.

Accessing fresher, healthier, local food in urban locations is one benefit among many others. Social benefits of urban agriculture range from the creation of self-sufficient communities to creating local employment, and some of the environmental and economic benefits are the creation of green areas, reduction of urban heat, natural water and air purification systems...

Most urban agriculture programs are implemented on a relatively small scale. This means that local property and constraints can be taken into consideration but it is also restricting in terms of generalizing the practice.

However, some citywide initiatives are starting to emerge. The City of Paris has recently set quite impressive objectives in terms of greening the city, including through food production. Many communal gardens are flourishing across the city and each citizen can now participate in greening both public and private spaces. For example, if you want to start growing your own food in front of your office you just need to ask for a *permis de végétaliser* and the town hall will provide you with free soil and seeds as long as you don't invade the entire pavement. You can also ask them to plant a pear tree or an apple tree in your garden, all for free as well!

Informal urban food growing is also a popular trend, officially called guerrilla gardening. Given the amount of vacant land in our cities, some communities have taken up the mission to grow food in those unused spaces. The initial guerrilla gardening website groups were for "anyone interested in the war against neglect and scarcity of public space as a place to grow things, be they beautiful, tasty or both!". It's getting so popular that you now have a plethora of special guerrilla gardening kits that are being sold or distributed to take over your neighborhood. These include the famous "seed bombs", a mix of soil, clay and seeds that you can throw wherever seems appropriate and hopefully in a few months you'll get a few sprouts and maybe more.

But the first step in participating in edible cities is to have a look around you for what is already there to eat. To help you, "Falling Fruit" is a citizen-led collaborative global initiative that gathers data on available food growing in public spaces. Anyone can add a fruit tree or a bush they know of. A few town halls have even shared all their data on the platform. You can find it online at fallingfruit.org.

Now go out to spot those edibles in your neighborhood and find a place you'd like to green!