

URBAN, SCHOOL AND COLLECTIVE GARDENS

Decorative greenery or urban gardens? Recently we read in the news about fruit and vegetables from London's neighbourhood gardens being served at the Olympic athletes' canteen (<http://www.capitalgrowth.org>). Social, school and community gardens — these are just a few of the forms, some of them more consolidated, others more innovative, now appearing in towns and cities. So why are so many gardens springing up? Maybe because they are the simplest form of self-production of food, a chance to keep in contact with the neighbours through habits and traditions that mark time and relax the mind.

We take our cue not only from the social garden in Cervignano, (http://www.slowfoodvfg.it/home_sff.php?n=734&l=it/) or the gardens of the post-earthquake "tent cities" of L'Aquila (<http://www.newsfood.com/q/38615349/l-aquila-slow-food-progetto-quot-10-orti-per-10-tendopoli-quot/>), but also, from the spontaneous citizen movements that step in to modify flower beds earmarked as public greenery, when no other land is available (http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2009/luglio/14/Milano_aiuola_diventa_orto_Zucchine_co_7_090714013.shtml), or from other movements that protest when they are limited to using urban agricultural land (see the case of Grugliasco <http://www.lunanuova.it/news/427660/Per-gli-orti-urbani-ora-serve-la-cauzione.html>). The moment has probably come to reconsider urban greenery and the use made of it, in Italy and the rest of Europe largely geared to the decorative aspect since the 17th and 18th centuries. This has contributed to the loss of the biodiversity of local flora. About 11 per cent of Italian flora consists of non-native species or others such as *Robinia pseudoacacia*, *Prunus serotina* and *Reynoutria japonica*, classic examples of species introduced to beautify our gardens and now naturalized here to the detriment of native ones (Celesti Grapow L., 'La Flora', in Blasi C., Boitani L., La Posta, Manes F. and Marchetti M., *Stato Della Biodiversità in Italia*, Rome, Palombi Editore, 2005). Even the European Union has become aware of the phenomenon in recent years and believes it is important to fight it by reintroducing local species to city parks. Hence the choice of new plants may fall on edible species that are part of our flora such as the hazelnut tree (*Corylus avellana* L.) (<http://www.verdeblog.com/il-nocciolo-arbusto-bello-perfetto-anche-per-siepi-originali-201203/>), the cherry tree (*Prunus avium* L.), the almond tree (*Prunus dulcis* L.), the walnut tree (*Juglans regia* L.), the chestnut tree (*Castanea sativa*) and so on. Citizens thus have

the chance to enjoy a pleasant experience, picking a fruit and tasting it, getting to know its different varieties and, maybe, helping to care for and promote respect for it.

Let us not forget that gardens and orchards are versatile, interdisciplinary educational tools that were already working successfully in schools at the start of the last century, in the wake of a pedagogic movement based on pragmatism and activism. Witness the garden of the Scuola Rinnovata Pizzigoni in Milan (<http://www.scuolarinnovata.it>). Through a garden *I learn by doing, observing and waiting*, I alternate it with book study and broaden my way of learning — by training my senses, for example. When educational models work, they proliferate and fuse; hence the birth of “Gardens of Peace” (<http://www.ortidipace.org>); the Slow Food “Orto in condotta” school garden project (<http://www.slowfood.it/educazione>); the “Thousand Gardens in Africa” project (<http://www.fondazione Slow Food.it>); edible school gardens (<http://edibleschoolyard.org>) — the list could go on and on. For the “Orto in condotta” project, for example, the school garden provides an opportunity to build a learning community, to weave a web of relations between a school and the area in which it is situated, and to study history and geography through the products and testimonies of local artisans, senior citizens and also young scholars.

A garden can be an open-air classroom, a veritable “life school”, for young and old alike.

Valeria Cometti, head of education at Slow Food Italy in collaboration with Luca Miserere, a botanist and Slow Food Italy trainer