



# URBAN digging up the dirt FARMING

 **TOTALLY STOCKHOLM** 17

**SOWING SEEDS WITH...**

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# GETTIN DIGGY WITH IT

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Not too long ago I lived in Maine, a state that boasts the oldest organic farming association in America and serves as a mecca for any aspiring young farmer in the country. A few short years later and happily I'm seeing the same progress here in Stockholm.

The green trend has metamorphosed into a movement and is well on the way to becoming a way of life. The kid that grew up in the greenest capital in Europe has turned into a neo-hippy, and the eco-hipster is thriving in small guerrilla gardens and colony plots dotting Södermalm and beyond. Stockholmers have gotten tired of waiting in line for their allotment gardens and have decided to take matters into their own green-fingered hands. Urban farming, we salute you.

**T**rädgård på Spåret is exactly what it sounds like: a garden on discontinued train tracks. Situated in the heart of Eriksdal, the organisation is just a year old but already includes over 300 members. The project was inspired by urban gardens such as Prinzessinnengärten in Berlin and the High Line in New York, and is a part of a growing global urban farming movement. The group even runs its own café and farmers' market and organizes events such as culture walks, concerts and DJ sets, and food trucks have been known to pop by on summer days. A special children's project, "Barnens Trädgård på Spåret", has been started as well, so a small part of the garden is completely in the hands of school children who go there to learn about growing.

"Many of us who live in town have no or little experience of farming," says Lisa Kopp, who's part of the project. "Although gardening is nothing new on Söder – colony gardens have been around for decades and there used to be a greenhouse here in Skanstull at the beginning of last century - the phenomenon of urban farming is relatively new and has recently been attracting public attention. The increasing urbanization creates a distance from nature. During the green wave of the 1970s, people would leave the city for the country, but nowadays we're choosing to bring nature into the city. The sustainable city is now a hot topic for many architects and urban planners, so this is definitely not some fading trend."

"The movement spans everyone from eco-hipsters to 'sack-farmers' in slum areas who harvest for the hungry. One of the driving forces behind our initiative was to learn about the growing process, but also to leave our desk jobs and do some physical work outdoors. Then of course there's the joy of getting to eat up the results. It's a tremendous feeling to be able to pick what you eat from the soil you've tilled yourself, rather than from a store shelf. When you know how to grow your own, it becomes hard not to do it."

"Last summer, urban gardening exploded as several different gardens opened, so a few of us decided to get this network together to help each other out," says Ulrika Flödin Furås, a co-founder of the newly-started Stadsodling Stockholm. Ulrika, a writer and photographer, has also overseen a smaller project on Södermalm called Odling i Parken. "Our next project will be installing a new garden at the Armémuseum," she says.

Despite coming from a city where for the most part you can only grow on your windowsill or balcony, Ulrika has been gardening all her life. "Everyone in my family did it, so it always felt natural to me. I would love to have a small allotment, but there are huge queues to get them. Gardening is more than a hobby for me; it's a way of life. I do a lot of experiments and try different varieties. I grow on any spot I find."

"There's a huge interest in gardening now. For a long time it was just older people that did it, but now young people have started to grow as well. I think it has to do with the current crisis in Europe - people understand we can't keep on living the way we have. This is very apparent in southern Europe, for example. People have really started to grow their own there since the economic difficulties hit them. I also think we're just tired of buying and have developed a shopping mall fatigue."

"Stockholm is a bit late in embracing this movement. I'd say we're at



Photo: Magnus Svaneby

least a couple of years behind cities like Göteborg and Malmö, and even further behind other European cities. The urban farming movement has the same spirit as the vintage movement that's been very noticeable lately. We want to go back to basics and we also want to go back to our own neighbourhood. It's a cosy way of getting to know each other. If you have a neighbourhood garden you get to know your neighbours. Gardening is basically a fun way of changing our habits, instead of just getting depressed about the state of the world. You get happy growing, green makes you happy."

**"I got into urban farming** a few months ago, but I'd always been looking for an alternative way of living as I didn't want to be a product of society," says Benjamin Gaspar Anselmo. "Society is not sufficient enough and it doesn't think about what's best for everyone. For me, urban farming is a way of saying we don't need supermarket



photo: Urika Flodin Fjärås

kets, as the products they sell are not necessarily good for the environment and not sustainable for the earth."

Benjamin has spent several years traveling and through that he started discovering and getting interested in sustainable buildings. Once he got back to Sweden, he found out that there are many rules and regulations regarding buildings and that land here is very expensive, but that growing in the city was relatively easy. "Slowly I started building aquaponic systems, which are getting really big in Australia and the US and are a great way of doing urban farming in your apartment. Aquaponics is a combination of aquaculture and hydroponics and means you don't have plants in the soil. When you combine these two systems they're very sustainable. All the fish waste goes directly to the plant and the plant cleans the water. As I work in demolition, I get a lot of material for building my projects and most of my systems are made from re-used materials."

"I've travelled a lot in South America, where movements like this are pretty much non-existent. Here we have money to do things like this, but in poorer countries they don't have that luxury. They can't choose organic food, they just need food. But ironically, the quality of food in those countries is still better. When it comes to fruit and veggies the quality became a lot worse when we entered the EU because they standardized everything."

"As it is now, people won't move from the city. Urbanization has been going on for so long and is still an on-going process. Urban farming is a part of a new hope for a better future. The movement of urban farming is very far ahead, while society is eight steps behind. You need the support of the municipality to start allotments; alternatively, you can do guerrilla gardening but that's not a solution, we need permission to do this so we can do it right. If I had the choice, I'd put greenhouses and parks on the rooftops in the city. One of the politicians here in Solna actually suggested doing that, but the process is very slow. Environmental awareness is still relatively new and ten years ago it would've been political suicide to talk about these issues. At least now we're heading in the right direction."

**Paul Teepen** grew up in the Netherlands with the goal of becoming a veterinarian. But he soon found out that as farms started getting bigger, it became more complicated to practice, so he decided to find another profession. "One day I came across a book by John Seymour about self-sufficiency that made a huge impact on me, and it

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photo: Magnus Sjöström



photo: Magnus Svan

was then I decided I wanted to become a farmer.”

Paul started working with a biodynamic gardener in the early eighties and has since learned by doing. “As Holland is so small and there’s so little land there, I wanted to move to a country that had more nature to offer.” So Paul moved to Sweden and started his career in agriculture by borrowing a farm and getting help from another farmer. Eventually he bought his own just outside the city; that was 20 years ago. “For the most part we’re self-sufficient, I’d say 95 percent of the year. But it depends on how good the season is. Comparing Holland and Sweden, I’d say that people here are closer to nature, but that ecological food production is more developed in Holland. But soon Sweden will catch up.”

“Urban farming is a rather late development. One of the things that contributes to the movement, and helps making it so rapid, is the internet. It’s getting a lot easier for people to discover the possibilities of growing your own, as well as getting in contact with other growers and form communities through the internet. And then there are of course the scandals in the food industry, like the recent issue with horsemeat. Things like that makes people start thinking that something has to change.”

**Six years ago**, while studying biology at Stockholm University, Karolina Lisslöö and Josefina Oddsberg were having lunch together while discussing their concerns about the disappearance of flower species in the city. During their class on sustainable development in urban areas, they had learned that every year a few more species disappear due to lack of pollinating insects, so during their brain-

storming lunch session the girls decided that they would venture into the world of bee keeping. “We didn’t know anything about it, but we still managed to get Djurgårdsförvaltningen to fund the project,” says Karolina. “They used to have bee keepers on Djurgården back in the day so they were more than happy to support us.”

“We wanted to include other students so more people could start doing this in their own neighbourhoods. In the beginning we were a group of 10-12 people and through this process we started up several hives, but nobody ended up following through with the idea. So when Josefina and I finished school and got jobs we didn’t have time to keep up the hives, so a couple of years ago we decided to either stop the project or start a real service, and that’s how we ended up doing this full time.”

Bee Urban is a very busy and successful company these days. The girls rent out bee hives to companies, organize educational programs, hold lectures at the university, run biodiversity gardens, and act as consultants to other companies that are starting up gardens or beehives, recommending which flowers are suitable for that environment and promoting flowers that are beneficial for insects. “We started our company to save the flowers, but we’ve since found out that 40 percent of wild bees are on the verge of extinction, so now we’re actually more focused on trying to save the bees! They’re a key species of the whole system. In the States, somewhere between 50 to 90 percent of bees have died, and this has been all over the news there. But here we haven’t noticed much media coverage for our dying bees, so now we’ve kind of started a lobby group to get more attention for them. Other countries have also gotten interested in our project so we’re starting a franchise in other cities, both in Europe and in New York.”

“I think we get hit by a green wave every 10-15 years, and every time they get a bit stronger. The market has changed and municipalities are more open to urban farming. People are much more aware of organic and locally-produced food nowadays. I feel like our generation was the first to not have a summerhouse in the country, and when you get that urbanized and lose that connection with nature, you have to start finding ways to get close to the green in other ways. Stockholm is not a leading city at all when it comes to this movement; Malmö for example is much further ahead. But when you look at the queues we have for allotment gardens here, with waiting lists of up to 20 years long, you can still see the enormous interest. The will is definitely there.”

**Folkodlarna** was started as a community effort in Skarpnäck about four years ago and as a reaction to modern food production and peak oil problems. Their community garden, “matparken”, has become a part of the neighbourhood and is a source of pride for its inhabitants. “Our primary issue is not the food but the social context and learning from each other by giving and taking,” says Mica Lisitschkin, an original member of the group. “It’s important that we learn to cooperate with the people around us. It’s a beautiful and diverse mix of people and whether we’re there for some peace and quiet, our love for working with plants, health reasons, or activism efforts, we’re all united through farming side by side in our garden.”

“When I grew up, we were self-sufficient when it came to veggies and berries. Cultivating most of my own food is in my background, so I know how much better it tastes and how satisfying it is to get that contact with nature when you work with plants and soil.” Mica also belongs to Gerillaodlarna, a farming group in nearby Kärrtorp. “The ideology behind that is that everybody has the right to grow food in the city, without needing to pay for an allotment garden or ask for permission from officials.”

“Urban farming is quite new in Sweden and Stockholm is so behind other cities! This movement has been established in the UK and US for decades. There was a lot of urban farming during the war for instance; back then you had so-called “Victory Gardens” so people could get food during the shortage. In our current economic crisis we’re witnessing a similar trend, particularly in Southern Europe, in countries like Spain and Greece. We are just taking our first baby steps here in Stockholm and it can be a bit frustrating. I think people have started to be more mindful of what they eat though, but I still don’t think people understand just how serious the situation with our food is. Laws against pesticides, herbicides, and other toxic materials are much too lenient. We can’t just wait around for things to change - we need to wake up and realize that we can make the changes ourselves.” **TS**