

Community Gardens in Berlin and Dublin: Who Knows Best?

Community gardens are a recent form of urban growing project. In Ireland they are a 21st Century addition to green space infrastructure in towns and cities, and particularly so within Dublin. Here urban administration often lumps them together with the more familiar Allotment Gardening or Schrebergärten as they are called in Germany. As a rule of thumb allotments tend to be more individually oriented, while community gardens feature more common amenities and are more likely to be controlled by a non-profit group. Community gardens are made by and for members of their local community. They are sustainable because they manage their own resources and maintenance, and they are also very inclusive because they can involve anyone who wants to join in, usually without the need to join a waiting list.

Communal Gardening in North Dublin:

Having volunteered at “Serenity Community Garden” since 2009 I had already gained a good knowledge of community gardening activity across Dublin, and particularly at this North Dublin Community Garden. So I decided to start this article by interviewing Marion Kelly, who is the Chairperson of Serenity Community Garden. The garden was established on public land in Phibsborough back in March 2009. Marion explained that the garden was initiated because this previously unused green space was neglected, and that the land needed to be gardened and cared for. This combined with the fact that few of the local residents had their own garden made the creation of Serenity Community Garden an obvious project for many residents. Serenity Community Garden has been supported by Dublin City Council who along with the Community Foundation for Ireland, and An Taisce Green Communities Programme, has provided funding through project specific grants. The garden does not however have any security of tenure from the local authority and so its long term survival as a community amenity ultimately depends upon the good will of individuals.

Communal Gardening in South Dublin:

Within South Central Dublin, one of the cities first contemporary community gardens was set up in April 2005 on squatted land along the banks of the Grand Canal in Dolphins Barn. The industrial estate that owns this site evicted the gardeners after a year of hard work had been invested in cultivating the site. That land remains undeveloped to this day. There is often a perception by land owners, and sometimes the surrounding residents, that any change in use, or more accurately non use of a site, could be bad. This attitude can become established if residents have previously suffered a bad experience with anti social behaviour at the site in question, leaving them resisting even positive change, from a fear that any project or initiative will attract more anti social behaviour. The Dolphins Barn Community Garden finally received the support that it deserved in 2007 when an agreement was reached to convert another derelict site into a new community garden. The newly renamed South Circular Road Community Garden has been up and running successfully since that time and now provides an important amenity within South Central Dublin for both recreational and educational gardening activities. Gavin Kenny is a volunteer at the South Circular Road Community Garden and he explained that the garden currently receives no funding and is managed and resourced by the good will of its volunteers. There is however assistance through membership of support programmes and networks. Specifically An Taisce Green Communities Programme, and Dublin Community Growers. The Green Communities Programme provides ongoing horticultural and environmental management training on topics helpful to urban growing enthusiasts. These have included composting workshops, plant propagation, and fruit tree pruning. This programme also extends third party public liability insurance to member gardens. Dublin Community Growers is a network of community

gardeners who meet monthly within central Dublin. An open group, they meet to discuss community gardening projects, and the issues faced by these projects. Dublin Community Growers also organise events to promote community gardens as amenities to be valued.

Communal Gardening on School Land in Dublin:

Elsewhere in Dublin there are also community gardens sited within the grounds of schools such as Saint Audoens Community Garden on Cook Street, South Central Dublin, sited opposite to the historic city wall. The aims of the garden are to give the children, and their parents, as well as the local community, an opportunity to experience planting and harvesting from raised bed gardens and recycled containers. Garden volunteer Tony Lowth explained that a large part of the garden's funding is acquired by the collection and sale of aluminium cans, as well as the resale of home made compost. All proceeds being used to maintain and expand the garden. This strikes me as an example of a Dublin Community Garden that has the potential to operate on a more self sustaining basis, perhaps as a community based micro business.

Off to Berlin!

So far so good in Dublin. We have seen an increase from two or three community gardens back in 2005 to at least 46 by October 2013. But who has been gardening communally in Berlin, and what is the result? I set off to a cold snowy Berlin in late January 2014 armed only with notebook, camera, and certain preconceptions as to what German style community gardens would be like. These involved vague ideas that they would somehow be better organised and more comprehensively supported by the local administrative bodies. As with all new experiences in life, reality when compared with the preconception often proves to be quite different.

Communal Gardening in Kreuzberg:

The first garden that I visited in Berlin was the Bunte Beete Community Garden in Kreuzberg, Central Berlin. Oliver Ginsberg is one of the founders of this garden and he met up with me to show me around and answer a few questions. Oliver explained that Kreuzberg had been a very poor part of the city from 1945 until only about 5 years ago, and that it has over a 50% population of immigrants. A primary objective of this garden is to allow a positive exchange between people from different national and cultural backgrounds, focussing on the common interest which is organic gardening. Bunte Beete Community Garden is fortunate to have access to a 1200 metre squared site within the grounds of a local school. The city council made school land available to the public 10 years ago in order to help reduce the cost of grounds maintenance. The free use of this site also comes with the use of a pre-existing ground water well, and the school also provides space for storing tools and materials, as well as sanitary facilities for gardeners. However nothing in life is quite this easy, especially in a large city. There are costs incurred by this community garden project. These include the €150 annual insurance for the garden, and Berlin also has rates for water extraction, currently at €2 per cubic metre. In order to acquire both insurance and the contract from the school for using the site, this community gardening group had to become a registered voluntary association, Eingetragener Verein (e. V.) in German, back in 2008. This was necessary in order for the gardening group to be granted access to set up Bunte Beete Community Garden after a further 2 years of negotiations. Initially the garden was set up with EU funds applied for by the school, but now the garden is self funding through its own membership. It later became apparent that Bunte Beete Community Garden actually has a

very good deal, as most of Berlin's urban growing projects have to pay to lease land, and in Central Berlin this is not cheap.

Communal Gardening in Köpenick:

My next destination was the Wuhlegarten way out to the south east of Berlin in Köpenick, next to the River Wuhle. Luckily Brigitte Kanacher-Ataya was kind enough to collect me from Kreuzberg and take me through the suburbs of East Berlin to the very well hidden Wuhlegarten. When we arrived we entered a large and sprawling community garden with many installations and amenities including a much appreciated toilet. With the temperature below -10 °C it was a great relief to be welcomed with an open fire, and later Brigitte served everyone hot soup, prepared using some of the produce from this garden. This was the first Interkultureller Garten in Berlin, and was founded in June 2003. Created on an area of 5000 square metres, people from different cultures now grow fruit and vegetables together. The municipal authority owns the land and the Wuhlegarten leases this for about €100 per year. This contract is renewed each year, but future site development is always a worry for the gardeners. The gardeners' main desire would be to have more security of tenure, to know that they will be able to continue with their cultivation beyond the end of every year. Insurance is a significant cost at this site being €800 annually, and the lease requires them to have the trees inspected annually. This can prove to be expensive as with the storms of 2012 when they had to pay tree surgeons €600 per tree to repair damage. The terms of the lease also require that there is no commercial activity, so all of these overheads must be met by the volunteer gardeners themselves. This is done via a membership fee of €5 per month and by charging €10 per plot per month, all from a base of 40 members.

Communal Gardening in Lichtenberg:

The third garden that I visited in Berlin was the Interkultureller Garten in Lichtenberg. I arrived on a cold grey afternoon to meet with Anne Haertel in the eastern suburbs of Berlin. This garden is hidden among huge grey concrete apartment complexes that were built in 1985, and that now house a large and often non-integrated immigrant population. The architecture was particularly grim on a cold snowy January afternoon, but there are large green spaces between the blocks of apartment housing. The green space is enough to comfortably accommodate this community garden, which with its 13,000 square metres is the largest Interkultureller Garten in Berlin. Even in the depths of winter I got a strong sense of being somewhere else entirely. Despite being surrounded in the mid distance by sky blocking walls of apartments, all of my attention was focused upon the myriad of woodland copses, garden plots, bee hives, and communal composting sites that were now snow covered mounds. In summer with the trees in leaf, and added bird song, the transformation must be complete, and you would find yourself no longer within the city. I spoke to Anne within the warmth of the on site community centre over coffee and she explained the strategy of this garden project to me. Anne is the manager of this Sozdia Foundation Project which initiated the garden back in 2006 by getting some of the residents to form a registered voluntary association. There are now 51 plots, 35 occupied by residents and the rest used as common ground. No formal training is provided for the gardeners and instead the garden is run as an experimental field within the community. This serves to get people of different nationalities working together and builds community. Anne explains that it is a strategy not to grow produce in the most productive way, but instead to let the residents find solutions and techniques that work for them. This garden is sited upon land owned by the city which is currently leased for 10 years at €900 per annum. On top of this there are also bills for water, electricity, waste collection, and street cleaning. The garden is charging a membership fee of €15 per member per month in order to meet these costs. Anne also explained that being a

member of the Interkulturelle Garten Network helps with the purpose of visibility and attracting new members through the website listing. However it was also mentioned that there is a movement to set up a representational organisation specifically to protect the approximately 90 community gardens across Berlin. This is partly in response to a political aim to develop vacant plots within Berlin which is threatening some gardens.

How to Garden Communally and Pay the Bills!

Finally the Prinzessinnengärten is located within Kreuzberg at Moritzplatz, and it is a garden that I was particularly interested in visiting because of the way that it was organised from its creation in 2009 by Robert Shaw and Marco Clausen. As Marco had stated in his 2012 document; *Cultivating a Different City* “We were not thinking of self sufficiency in terms of food, but in terms of a steady income.” So how does a community garden sustain not only itself but also its gardeners? The outlook for getting any answer wasn't good when I arrived on Friday the 31st of January 2014 as a sign informed me that the garden was closed until April 2014! Luckily a garden worker unloading a delivery of wooden planks allowed me access to the garden. This football field sized garden is located on one corner of a busy intersection, and there is quite a lot of infrastructure on-site which is cobbled together from recycled materials. While the site is somewhat ramshackle as a whole, it is also functional, and not without its own crude charm. The garden is certainly no more unsightly than the concrete and glass expression of commerce raging on the other side of Prinzessinnengärten's fence. This garden is run as a business ... this is to say that it pays for its own way in the World. The gardener that kindly let me in to take photographs explained how Prinzessinnengärten pays its bills, taxes, and provides a livelihood for a number of garden employees through multiple activities. These include on site workshops, and the installation of gardens for schools. A lot of these revenue generating activities are complementary to one another. For instance garden tours are conducted as a source of income, and often the recipients are schools who may later engage with Prinzessinnengärten on offsite school garden projects.

Epilogue:

The lesson for success in moving community urban agriculture onto a self sustainable footing seems to be the operation of as many different but complementary revenue streams as possible. This was the advice offered to me back in 2010, by Hackney City Farm in London. Interestingly Hackney City Farm is a member of the UK Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, which is a cooperative network of great interest in both Germany and Ireland. I was surprised to find out that there is no equivalent to this network in Germany. Both Oliver from the Bunte Beete Community Garden, and Anne from the Interkulturelle Garten Berlin-Lichtenberg, believed that there was a need for such an organisation in Berlin in order to protect and consolidate the progress made by the many separate urban growing projects across this city.

It will be interesting to see how Prinzessinnengärten and other community gardens develop as both business and cultural asset as time passes. Will the business come to dominate, and if so what will be the result? Would we see a café, plant nursery, and garden landscaping business run increasingly along commercial lines, and presenting itself in a more familiar and generic manner? Or will such community gardens be able to consolidate their cultural credentials, and grow support from volunteers and customers alike, simply because they are not generic garden retail businesses?

Robert Moss is a community garden volunteer at the Serenity Community Garden, he is also the Secretary of Dublin Community Growers, and manages An Taisce's Green Communities Programme.

Links:

South Circular Road Community Garden: <http://southcirculargarden.blogspot.ie/>

Dublin Community Growers: <http://dublincommunitygrowers.ie/>

An Taisce Green Communities Programme: <http://www.antaisce.ie/education/Programmes/GreenCommunities.aspx>

Dublin Guide to Community gardening: http://www.dublin.ie/uploadedFiles/City_Development_Board/Community%20Gardens%20Booklet%202013.pdf

Interkulturelle und Urbane Gemeinschaftsgärten: <http://www.anstiftung-ertomis.de/english>

Bunte Beete Community Garden: <http://buntebeete.wordpress.com/>

Wuhlegarten: <http://wuhlegarten.de/welcome/>

Interkultureller Garten Berlin-Lichtenberg: <http://www.sozdia.de/Interkultureller-Garten.484.0.html>

Prinzessinnengärten: <http://prinzessinnengarten.net/>