

Urban agriculture

growing vegetables in cities



Agrodok 24

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Growing vegetables in cities

Jeroen Boland

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Foreword

Getting the subject of urban agriculture down to manageable and practical proportions in an Agrodok has been a cherished dream of Agromisa. The aim was to describe carefully considered, sustainable and practical methods for small-scale farming of crops in urban areas.

The diversity and extent of the topic of urban agriculture seemed almost impossible to define at every inch of the way, from drawing up the main structure right up to the translation stage of this Agrodok. The result is that this is a sort of “unfinished” edition.

I wish to thank those whose ideas and writing contributed to the creation of this Agrodok, in chronological order: Pim Henstra, Gijs Spoor, Esther Kuiler – now a successful urban farmer in Wageningen – and Jan Los. I also thank all the successive Agrodok coordinators for their constructive input. And, I am indebted to Wilfred Hertog (ETC) and Marjan van Dorp (IAC) for their comments on the content. Finally, the translator and the illustrator, each in their own way, added shape and form to the comprehensibility of the subject and quality of the result.

We wish all those who undertake urban agriculture much success, and we leave it to them to judge the extent to which we have succeeded in realising our aim towards a satisfactory result. We invite the response from readers and users of this Agrodok. Additional and practical descriptions will be most welcome. Critical readers can help feed discussion – also here at Agromisa – on topical developments in urban agriculture.

Agromisa realises that the urban animal husbandry theme has not yet had explicit exposure in the Agrodok series. Well aware of this gap Agromisa will do its utmost to bridge it.

Jeroen Boland
Writer and editor in chief

Wageningen, December 2001

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1 Introduction

1.1 Target group and outline of the subject

Urban agriculture can be described as follows:

“All forms of agricultural production in or directly adjacent to the city, which mainly provide urban markets with food products for sale to consumers or for consumption by the city-dwelling growers themselves.”

This AgrodoK has primarily been written for women and men involved in urban agriculture: those new to crop growing in towns, as well as the producer with prior experience in rural agriculture or horticulture who plans to grow food or market garden crops in urban areas.



Figure 1: Papaya and banana trees in the courtyard

It will also prove useful for those responsible for guidance of urban agriculture: district information services and community workers of community based organisation, non-governmental organisations, government services, agricultural and nutritional extension.

Urban agriculture covers a whole range of production systems, methods, techniques and socio-economic aspects. The diversity of the products can be divided into:

- vegetable horticulture,
- animal husbandry,
- fuel and food forestry, including agroforestry,
- integrated waste-water aquaculture, including fish production.

Other specialisations include the cultivation of herbs, ornamental plants, fruits and the production of silk.

This Agrodok concentrates on a number of facets:

- it mainly focuses on vegetable growing,
- primarily intended for one's own food supply,
- which can be achieved by means that are simple, cheap and locally available, and
- based on small-scale techniques.

The wide range of vegetable species grown in towns by horticultural techniques will only be mentioned in general terms. However, if you are thinking of producing a particular kind of vegetable or fruit, there may be another Agrodok that could give you the information you need. You may be able to consult the other sources in the list for further reading.

This publication helps you to make specific choices (Chapter 2) and describes aspects of safety, environment and health (Chapter 3). It contains techniques for small-scale horticulture around the (own) house or in the yard (Chapters 4 and 5). Soil and water problems get extra attention (Chapters 6 and 7). Although socio-economic aspects are not the main objective of this book, they are important enough to be mentioned (Chapter 8).

1.2 Choosing and experimenting

A great variety of material has been used to compile this Agrodok. It ranges from the important classical production principles of agriculture, such as the health of soil and crop, to the typical urban facets (like roof cultivation). Furthermore, local variants of methods and techniques often have their own specific and practical usefulness.

The choice is yours. The urban context offers opportunities for production, use of raw materials and marketing, which people living in rural areas do not have. But, this may also have its limitations. In the next chapter we will deal with questions that could help you choose your crops, location or technique.

You should experiment. There is a great diversity of technical aspects pertaining to urban agriculture and there is little universal that one can say about it. This is why this Agrodok contains a selection from a wide range of techniques, locations and conditions for urban agriculture.

Your first choice will not necessarily be the best. First, try out what will work under your own particular circumstances, in response to what you wish to cultivate and, last but not least, try out what gives you satisfaction. There are very many successful, locally-adapted variants of small-scale urban agriculture, worldwide. However, techniques are not always transferable from city to city or from country to country.