

Urban agriculture does not always result in better neighbourhoods

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While urban agriculture is often used as a tool for increasing social cohesion in neighbourhoods, Esther Veen believes that it does not always lead to better relationships between residents. This is the subject of her doctoral thesis, which she will be defending at Wageningen University on Monday 15 June 2015.

For her doctoral research, Wageningen student Esther Veen observed various community gardens where people from the same neighbourhood came together. She noted that not everyone participates in these gardens and how there is a tendency for groups to form.

"It is often assumed that community gardens benefit the neighbourhood, but the gardens are also a 'real world' in which issues arise," Veen explains. "Municipalities, initiators of [urban agriculture](#) projects and other stakeholders should adjust their often high expectations. A neighbourhood community garden does not break through existing social structures just like that, and it is hard to bring people from different socio-economic backgrounds into contact with each other." Veen's research does show that neighbourhood community gardens allow people to get to know each other better and ask each other for help more easily.

Interchangeable conversations

In addition to studying neighbourhood community gardens, Veen also observed community gardens where residents are mainly interested in growing fruits and vegetables but do not necessarily come from the same area. It showed that people like chatting to each other in a community garden, but that these contacts are easily exchangeable for conversations with others. Moreover, these chats rarely lead to contacts or friendships outside the community garden.

Not against 'the system'

Scientific literature often assumes that people who actively use community gardens have a certain resistance against the current food system, and that for them the community garden functions as an alternative food network. Veen's studies showed that these assumptions were erroneous in the community gardens she researched. People mainly

like to garden because they enjoy the act of gardening, not because they want to change the world or oppose the conventional food system. Veen: "Food from neighbourhood community gardens may fit into a lifestyle in which organic or local products play a major role for some people, but this is a personal consideration to them. They don't see themselves as part of an alternative food network."

Participative observation

By means of interviews and surveys, Veen studied seven community gardens in Almere (two), Amsterdam, Assen, Leeuwarden, Rotterdam and Zutphen. She also observed four of the seven community gardens via 'participative observation' - taking part and helping in activities organised by the community gardens, such as an Easter brunch and a harvest market. "This method allowed me to experience personally what it's like in the community garden," she says. "Interviewing people helped me learn much more about the social relationships that develop."

More information: "Shopping Versus Growing: Food Acquisition Habits of Dutch Urban Gardeners." [DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2014.964604](https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2014.964604)

"Motivations, Reflexivity and Food Provisioning in Alternative Food Networks: Case Studies in Two Medium-sized Towns in the Netherlands." edepot.wur.nl/241144

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