

# The Urban Farmers of St Petersburg

Annually up to 2,5 million inhabitants are involved in agricultural activities in St. Petersburg. The total area cultivated by city dwellers around the city is 560,000 ha, and in the summer time over 500,000 of them constantly live on their summer residences and other types of buildings on plots.

The main reasons for city dwellers to practice farming are (Moldakov, 1999):

- ❖ self-sufficiency, especially the supply of fresh green food;
- ❖ additional income, through the sale of fruits, vegetables, eggs, milk, and flowers. People's expenditures for food are very high, up to 60% of total income; pensions are very low and unemployment is high.
- ❖ access to "healthy" food
- ❖ leisure
- ❖ productive use of "free" resources, such as kitchen wastewater and residues.

Mainly middle-aged and elderly people carry out urban agricultural activities, falling between the ages of 35-45 and above; younger people are not interested or are engaged with other occupations. The tech-

nologies applied by these urban farmers are normally very basic: hand labour and simple tools.

In 1998, the urban farmers of St. Petersburg produced: 15,800 tons of potatoes; 47,400 tons of apples, pears and plums; 38,500 tons of vegetables; 7,900 tons of strawberries; and 23 million cut flowers on the plots (Maydachenko, 1999b). This is more than all agricultural farms of the Leningrad Region.

Urban agriculture is practised in the inner city and in the peri-urban areas. In the inner city the farming takes place in backyards, in public lands and vacant space near the houses, basements, rooftops, balconies, windowsills.

The areas for peri-urban farming may be located at the city boundaries (commercial or subsistence-oriented) or at larger distances (10-100 km). The latter includes the large amount of allotments with weekend or summerhouses, which are worked by Petersburg citizens during weekends in the summer periods. Thousands of

*The Urban Agriculture Magazine tends to focus on regions in the South. Most contributions and case studies draw heavily on experiences in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And as an initiative under RUAF, this is not surprisingly so. Another project on urban agriculture ETC Ecoculture is called "Soil and Water Management in Agricultural Production in Urban Areas in CEE/NIS Countries" (SWAPUA). The St. Petersburg Downtown Gardening Club is one of the six Eastern European organisations active in SWAPUA.*

urban people spend almost every weekend in these areas from mid-April until the end of October.

The agricultural activities provide an important way to solve the poverty and unemployment problems.

## HISTORY

The history of the urban gardening movement in St. Petersburg dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, when village noblemen moved into the city but kept their farming practices. They were the first to create a summer residence cum farm outside the city.

Until the Soviet period, St. Petersburg practically had no real urban area, but consisted of many one-level houses made of wood with small gardens and animals. The Soviet authorities did not welcome agricultural activities in the city, and built new multi-story apartments and subsequent infrastructure. Inner city agricultural activities, such as cultivation and selling of flowers or growing vegetables for sale, were allowed only to urban and suburban pensioners and invalids.

Individual subsistence oriented agricultural activities were permitted to rural and peri-urban inhabitants, but were limited by the significant tax to land-property.

Approximately from the beginning of the sixties, some urban families in St. Petersburg were

Selling products from the garden on the streets



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allowed to engage in agriculture on small sites in suburbs. Such sites were in the premises of suburban plants, of schools or hospitals, and the urban authorities did not object to such small gardens for their own use.

At the same time, others had the opportunity to cultivate for own use in community gardens in peri-urban areas created by co-operative societies. These gardens were divided into numerous clusters of plots of about 0.1 ha with small houses. Initially, these 'dachas' were exclusively state properties and were placed at the disposal of the Soviet Union's new "high society", formally for temporary use, but in reality they could be owned for life and inherited by the next generation. Their inhabitants were Communist Party functionaries and outstanding scientists, artists, actors, etc. These were places for relaxation and the agricultural activities represented no more than an exotic hobby.

After the Stalin era, some lands in peri-urban areas were made available to the DSK ('Association for cooperative building of single storey cottages'), which aimed to build for ordinary people. Small summer-houses were built on plots of around 0.1 ha on the basis of cooperative fees by special building companies and these houses were regarded as the assets of the dacha-building cooperative union. Since the late 1970s almost all Soviet enterprises and organizations began to ask the local authorities for permission to acquire plots for gardening, with single-storey houses on them. Usually lands placed at people's disposals were forest sites or on unused land, located 2-3 km from railroads or motorways and 10 up to 100 km from the cities. The plot-owners' main objective was to grow fruit, ornamental plants and vegetables for home consumption, while any surplus could be sold to neighbors and any chance purchasers. From 1985 onwards enterprises and organizations also helped their staff members with loans in order to acquire their plots of land. Between 1986 and 1996 the number of dacha-owners doubled. In the period of radical changes and economic crisis 1989 - 1996 the need to cultivate land was guided by the logic of survival. Since then, under the market economy, the agricultural production in the city became difficult, for instance because the cost for the transport has increased for non-pensioners and children (Maydachenko,

### The St. Petersburg Downtown Gardening Club (STDTGC)

The St. Petersburg Downtown Gardening Club has developed out of the Centre for Citizen Initiatives USA-Russia (CCI), a non-profit foundation. A group of enthusiastic people decided to establish this Club, as an effort to make the city more natural and ecological. The Club was officially registered in 1992 as an NGO.

In 1993 a Rooftop Gardening Programme (RGP) started. The main goal was to try out the gardening techniques developed by Dr. Martin Price of ECHO ("Educational Concerns for Hunger Organisations") for gardening on apartment-building rooftops (Martin, 1997).

The advantages of rooftop gardening in urban areas are many:

- ❖ large amounts of extra food can be raised
- ❖ household wastes can be directly utilised; the Club used empty basements to accommodate special containers with California redworms that recycle kitchen wastes into compost, which is subsequently used as fertiliser for the rooftop gardens (Gavrilov, 1997)
- ❖ people can engage in gardening right where they live and do not need to travel far from the city; women with young children can engage in gardening, generating income, while staying close enough to the home to look after the children.
- ❖ improved ecology (household waste recycling; production of oxygen: one rooftop garden of 150 m<sup>2</sup> can create enough oxygen for 100 people to breathe for one year)
- ❖ people in the city can feel closer to nature

Next to rooftop gardening the Club also started kitchen gardens in the "Kresty" (Cross) city prison, developed a model ecological apartment building (Eco-House), started gardening as a therapy at the prosthesis institute, and participated in a school gardening and recycling projects. The Club focusses now on the creation of better marketing conditions for small urban and peri-urban farms and promotes urban agriculture as an integral part of the urban productive system.

1999a). Market oriented production became unprofitable (Maydachenko, 1999). Still however, many people, with the time and means to cultivate, aspire to get their own peri-urban plot by any means possible. St. Petersburg provides to all pensioners a subsidy on public transport costs in order to allow them to go to their plots and cultivate for their subsistence.

### TYPES OF URBAN AGRICULTURE IN ST. PETERSBURG

Several types of urban agriculture have been established. There are the former co-operative types: Dacha, Sadovodstvo and Ogorod; as well as individual land plots.

*Dachas* are blocks of gardening plots (0.08-0.15 ha) with cottages. They are usually located in the peri-urban area of the older cities and are presently under private ownership. There are approximately 150,000 dachas in the Leningrad Region, most of them 50 km. from the city. The production is mainly for subsistence.

A *sadovodstvo* is a gardening community, consisting of 50-600 gardening plots (usu-

ally 0.06 ha), with small summer houses and a common infrastructure (roads, wells). *Sadovodstvos* are usually located in the peri-urban areas of new and industrial cities and towns, and are now under private ownership. Today there are some 2800 officially registered gardening communities located in areas around St. Petersburg which include 560,000 plots (Maydachenko, 1999a). They also produce mainly for subsistence.

An *ogorod* is a gardening plot (0.02-0.3 ha) without any buildings, and often with no or little infrastructure, and mostly informal or even illegal entities. *Ogorods* are usually

### The agricultural activities provide an important way to solve the poverty problems

located in the peri-urban areas of small towns. *Ogorods* are on municipal lands or privately owned. There are some 180 000 plots (Maydachenko, 1999a).

*Factory gardens and greenhouses*; during the communist period nearly all plants

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and factories used to grow food in gardens and greenhouses to feed their employees in its canteens. Especially older, larger companies and military firms continue to do so. Land under greenhouses is in municipal or private ownership.

*Individual permanent houses with backyard gardens* can still be found in the older parts of the city and in the city periphery (often privately owned or municipal property)

Various households and private entrepreneurs use the *basements* to grow mushrooms, other use the *rooftops and balconies* to grow vegetables, other use these places to process fruits and vegetables

In the periphery of the city one encounters *conglomerates of private parcels of land that formed part of a former collective and state farm*. These lands are now belonging to the former labourers of the collective or state farm. The production is more integrated, including small livestock and fruits, and aims at both subsistence and market production.

Furthermore, former kolhozes and sovchozes are transferred in a “company with limited liability” and maintained as *large-scale, fully commercial farms*, with the former kolhoz- or sovhoz- members as shareholders of the company.

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### NATIONAL AND LOCAL POLICIES

The current Russian law allows and even stimulates the existence and further development of agricultural activities in the city and its periphery. For example, one clause mentions, that the authorities *are obliged* to help the gardening associations on important issues, such as construction and reparation of roads, transmission lines, water drains and water supply. Local authorities are also supposed to facilitate the transport of gardeners to their sub-urban plots and summer residences (Marjina, 1998).

City authorities in St. Petersburg consider urban and peri-urban farming to be a major social factor and means of subsistence for at least 2 million citizens (total city population nearly 5 million). St. Petersburg city budget provides to all pensioners a subsidy on public transport costs in order to allow them to go to their plots and cultivate for their subsistence. From May to October, twenty-five specialised medical ambulances serve gardening and country facilities. An Information Centre for gardeners has been created to assist in the “management and development of kitchen gardens”.

The City of Petersburg operates an Office for the Development of Horticulture and Gardening in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region, which co-ordinates the activities of state agencies and local government agencies. One of the other activities of the Office is the organisation, jointly with the “Union of Gardeners” of the yearly competition “Gardener of the year” as an effort to promote technological innovation and “rational” land use.

### MAIN PROBLEMS

Despite the fact that the authorities of St Petersburg disburse funds for services to (peri-) urban gardeners for garbage collection, maintenance of roads, wells, etc., gardeners complain that the living conditions in the garden communities are not up to standard as in the city itself. They refer to police control and health care services, amongst others.

Peri-urban counties claim to be compensated for their extra administrative

expenses for services to the almost two million St Petersburg residents, who spend their summers in peri-urban locations. One must consider that one garden area alone, “Trubnikov the Boron” in Tosno, houses 50,000 summer residents, while in the nearby “Danube” garden area, almost 100 thousand gardeners are active during summer weekends. Another key problem is the marketing of the produce. The businessmen from St Petersburg only come irregularly and transport is costly.

Theft is also a major problem in the gardening areas. It has been proposed that police from St Petersburg helps the local police to patrol the gardening complexes.

Other constraints for the further development of urban agriculture are:

- ❖ absence of a clear strategy for the development of urban agriculture in St Petersburg;
- ❖ insufficient information on nutritional, socio-economic, ecological and health aspects of urban gardening;
- ❖ the shortage of written information (books, articles) on urban agriculture for urban gardeners;
- ❖ low rentability of agricultural activities.

### OPPORTUNITIES OF URBAN AGRICULTURE

The opportunities for urban agriculture in St Petersburg are many.

The following issues are opportunities and at the same time challenges:

- ❖ there are plenty of vacant lands in the city that can be used for small scale agriculture;
- ❖ most urban gardeners are optimistic, well-informed, self-trained and skilled;
- ❖ many people are active in the field of sustainable and organic agriculture; the urban agriculturist in St Petersburg has never been keen to use chemicals and always preferring manure and compost;
- ❖ well-established education at the university level;
- ❖ low salaries, limited purchasing power and high market prices of agricultural products force people into self-production;
- ❖ growing governmental and municipal interest to support food security, self-employment and small enterprise development for social and political stability reasons.