

Urban Agriculture in the Netherlands

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Despite the domination of large-scale farming for export in the Netherlands, urban agriculture is growing in popularity. The reasons for this have not yet been studied systematically, but growing dissatisfaction with the conventional food system plays a part. This article looks at different strategies adopted by urban farmers and considers the implications of urban agriculture for public planning.

Concerns voiced include the environmental problems associated with large-scale and long-distance food chains (food miles), lack of sensory quality and diversity of food produced in the conventional system, and a general lack of trust in food coming from impersonal chains and anonymous origin (Wiskerke, 2009). Whereas many food-related issues tend to be defined as problems at the system level (e.g. greenhouse gas emissions), participating in or buying food from urban agriculture provides people with a way of actually doing something about the concerns they have (Van der Schans, 2010).

Citizen initiatives promote urban agriculture.

In several Dutch cities citizen initiatives have emerged which promote the regionalisation of food production and consumption. Urban agriculture is often part of these programmes. *Gezonde Gronden* (Healthy Soil) in The Hague is one of the first of these initiatives. Their goal is that citizens in the metropolitan area in the west of the Netherlands (including the cities of The Hague, Delft and Rotterdam) are able to enjoy food produced on healthy soil in their own town and region. To this end they organise activities such as courses for city dwellers and (periurban) farmers about more sustainable food production (using growing methods to strengthen the natural productive capacity of the agro-ecosystem, without using chemical inputs, and by closing water and nutrient cycles). *Gezonde Gronden* also has demonstration projects in allotment gardens and parks in The Hague. Other Dutch cities have similar initiatives. Interestingly these citizen initiatives have an integrated view of urban agriculture, seeing it as source of fresh and wholesome food, a mechanism to bring about social integration and economic regionalisation, and a strategy to improve the resilience and sustainability of the metropolitan food system.

Political support

Recently the Dutch Minister of Agriculture also embraced the concept of urban farming. In an explanation of the policy document on Sustainable Food (LNV, 2009) she noted the

important role of urban farms in re-connecting modern city dwellers with their food (DePers, 2009). The Ministry regards urban farms not so much as an instrument to improve access to fresh food (presumably the conventional food system in the Netherlands is able to deal with that). Instead, the focus is on their symbolic function: they have the potential to act as a bridge between city dwellers who are increasingly ignorant about food production and professional farmers, who increasingly feel misunderstood, especially when they adopt large-scale high-tech solutions in the pursuit of sustainability.

Unlike developed countries such as the US, there are no food deserts in the Netherlands; at least they are not an issue on the public agenda. Unlike developing countries such as Tanzania, growing your own food is not (yet) a basic necessity for the urban poor in the Netherlands: unemployment is relatively low and the social security provision is adequate at present. This does not mean there are no problems of access to food in this country, however. A recent study found that fresh produce is relatively more expensive than processed food and for people with lower incomes in particular, the price of food is an important issue in their buying behaviour (Waterlander et al, 2010).

A matter of definition

The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture seems to restrict the notion of urban farming to growing food within city limits. Internationally, the definition of urban farming also includes periurban areas: 'the entire area of land in which a city's influence comes to bear daily and directly on its population' (UNDP, 1996). Under this definition, many Dutch conventional farmers and growers would be classified as practising urban agriculture. Most Dutch agriculture (especially greenhouse vegetable growing and intensive livestock farming) is oriented towards the EU and world markets, rather than nearby town and city markets. In 2000 the Netherlands was more than self sufficient in potatoes (128%), vegetables (256%), pork (256%), eggs (256%) and cheese (246%) (Brouwer et al., 2004). The term 'metropolitan agriculture' has recently been coined for farmers and growers located close to large cities but whose production is oriented to the world market (Smeets, 2009).

Given the configuration of the agricultural sector in the Netherlands, one might wonder how urban agriculture initiatives survive economically, in the context of a predomi-

nantly export-oriented agricultural sector, which is also capable of providing fresh food efficiently and abundantly to Dutch towns and cities.

Market chain development

We now turn to some examples of urban agriculture in the Netherlands, looking at where they are located in relation to the city and how they market their produce. Dutch farmers, whether urban, periurban or rural, may choose to specialise, differentiate or diversify when adopting a marketing strategy (Van der Schans, 2007).

By specialising in one or few activities, farmers can fine-tune their operations and reduce costs of production, processing and distribution so that they are competitive on the world market. This is the strategy adopted by most farmers and growers in the Netherlands. Their aim is to increase the scale of their operation, particularly when they are located in the specially designated agricultural development zones, far away from urban populations. In order to compete with these more conventional supply chains, urban and periurban farmers with smaller production facilities have developed different strategies, notably differentiation and diversification.



Strawberry tree Jan Robben
Photo: Jan Willem van der Schans

Differentiation involves providing quality produce that is clearly different from conventional agricultural produce. Examples include heirloom vegetables, or exotic varieties, such as those grown by Gert Jan Jansen at the periurban farm *Hof van Twello*, close to the town of Deventer. Here there are different market gardens with forgotten vegetables, medieval varieties and vegetables for the ethnic market, all kinds of produce not found in a regular supermarket. Another example is specially developed varieties such as the *Lambada* variety of strawberry developed by Plant Research International (Wageningen University & Research Centre), and grown by Jan Robben, close to the town of Oirschot. Robben uses strawberry varieties that taste different ('better') than the conventional *El Santa*, but they are more vulnerable and therefore require more attention during transport. By making the supply chain shorter Robben is able to deliver strawberries to consumers on the same day that

they are harvested. He even takes the differentiation strategy a step further by offering his tasty strawberries individually at wedding parties, fashion events and food festivals. By creating a unique strawberry experience Robben differentiates his product from the regular strawberry commodity market in the conventional retail channel. Adopting this strategy enables him to command much higher prices for his strawberries.

Another approach to differentiation is called vertical integration, where you add more value to your produce by incorporating subsequent steps of the supply chain: processing, packing, distribution. *Hof van Twello* has adopted this strategy. Farmer Jansen processes fruits into juices and jams, and produces wines from his own grapes. But he quickly learned that adding value to a product often also adds costs, especially when the tasks performed are labour intensive. This is often the case when one tries to differentiate by producing 'artisanal' food as opposed to conventional industrially processed food. Although labour is quite expensive in the Netherlands, farmers have found ways around this. Urban and periurban farmers are at an advantage because they operate close to cities, where there is a plentiful supply of volunteers or people who are partly disabled but can still perform certain tasks. Jansen takes this strategy of engaging people at the farm one step further by organising jam or juice making workshops, and allowing participants to take some of the processed food home, but he also sells some of it for their benefit in his farm shop, and he takes a certain percentage of the produce from them to sell for himself in his farm shop.

The last strategy that Dutch farmers use to compete with export-oriented farming is to diversify their activities. Other activities include nature management and landscape services, social care (providing a protected working environment for the mentally stressed or partly disabled people), education and recreation (e.g. children's parties, planting or cooking workshops, bed & breakfast). An example of this is the urban farm *Maarschalkerweerd*, located in the south east of the city of Utrecht, which trains young people who are disadvantaged in the conventional labour market by allowing them to work on the farm. The farm also sells the food produced in this way to consumers through the farm shop and to local restaurants.

Diversification is a particularly successful strategy if there is synergy between the different activities, i.e. if the same facilities or social network are used for different purposes. An example is *'t Paradijs*, a farm close to the town of Barneveld which hosts a group of young people with social-psychological problems during the weekends and also sells produce to the children's parents. During the week, the farmers provide day care for elderly people, and also sell the farm produce to the canteen kitchens of the health care institutions where these clients come from. Farms in and very close to cities have a competitive advantage in providing social care services to people, because transport of clients to and from the farm is easier. Strawberry grower Robben has diversified in a very different way, becoming a party entertainer with his strawberry tree, a luxurious silvery ornamental tree, in which his

tasty strawberries are displayed individually. Partygoers can 'pick' them and dip them in specially developed gourmet dipping sauces. Recently Robben diversified even further, offering champagne and dark chocolate alongside his strawberries at parties to increase the allure.

The possibilities and opportunities for urban and periurban farms are to some extent defined by their location in relation to the city. 'Re-visiting the Von Thunen model', by mapping out systematically the relation between distance to city centre and the most likely type of farming activity, is a project beyond the scope of this article, but it certainly is an interesting way forward for future urban agriculture research in the Netherlands (Van der Schans, 2008).

Conclusions

Urban agriculture has become a popular term in the Netherlands, referring not just to farms and other production locations (e.g. allotment gardens) within city limits, but also to existing periurban farms. For the latter, the term 'urban agriculture' signifies a fundamental re-orientation from the rural towards the urban environment. Urbanisation is no longer a threat to these farmers (upward pressure on farm land prices, urban inroads on the large scale farmland structure), but it provides an opportunity. Farmers close to (or inside) cities may have smaller plots, but these plots are closer to city dwellers and can take advantage of direct sales, volunteer labour, and of speciality urban markets such as those for forgotten vegetables and ethnic food (Van der Schans et al., 2009).

Traditionally Dutch agriculture has been geared to global export markets. This has been facilitated by public planning that focuses on relocating farmers and growers to special agriculture development zones far away from cities and linking these production locations to a sophisticated logistical network geared at quickly and efficiently servicing world markets (Neuvel and Van der Valk, 2009). Urban and periurban farming in this country, however, is oriented toward customers living close to the production locations. This requires a different public planning philosophy, one that acknowledges the smaller scale, open landscapes close to cities as viable farmland worthy of protection, and therefore a move away from the current trend of converting these spaces into recreation areas and nature parks. Planning needs to focus on improving access to these farms for urban pedestrians and cyclists rather than the large vehicles generally used by conventional agriculture chains. It also requires public planning to acknowledge the multifunctional character of periurban and urban agriculture locations, and therefore a shift from strict single-use to more flexible mixed-use planning designations in the periurban farmland zone. For example, agricultural buildings could be used as education or recreation facilities, as processing sites, or as direct sales outlets.

The recognition of (peri)urban agriculture as a distinct but viable form of agriculture also means that logistical networks must be developed that use a finer geographical grid and are more decentralised. One can hardly expect each individual



Market gardens at Hof van Twello
Photo: Gert Jan Jansen

initiative to develop such an alternative logistical network (this would probably increase rather than decrease food miles). But if more initiatives shared a local network, or even better, if the conventional network also accommodated de-central food supply chains, then some critical mass could be reached and the disadvantages of ad hoc local-for-local solutions overcome.

The growing popularity of the term 'urban agriculture' signifies a reorientation in the public perception of the role of farming in the Netherlands. Whereas farming was previously seen as an activity functional to rural development, today (urban and periurban) farming is considered much more as an activity that may also be beneficial for urban development. A shift has taken place from 'how can the city help solve the problems of farmers?' to 'how can the farmers help solve the problems of cities?' Urban (and periurban) farming is one way to create greener, healthier and more attractive urban environments. 'Regional food' in the Netherlands is no longer thought of as food from a specified and protected region of origin (anywhere in the world, as long as it is from a designated region), but as the food from the specific region close to or within the city where one lives and where the food is consumed. Only if the food is from this region, my region, do I know that I can visit the farm, check the conditions of production, and enjoy the landscape as well.

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