

Urban Agroecology in Rome

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An horticulturist is resting and recovering from the bright sun. Photo by Maria Caterina Feole ©

What would be the distinctive features of urban agroecology that make it different from urban agriculture? What does agroecology look like in an urban environment? Taking urban gardens in the city of Rome, Italy as an example, this article describes some of the key aspects of the combination between agroecology and urbanity. The rationale for urban agroecology goes well beyond the need for more green spaces and fresh food; this article highlights the important social and political aspects that differentiate urban agroecology from other types of urban agriculture.

The concept of “agroecology” does not have a single and widely accepted definition. It is nevertheless historically rooted in social movements defending small-scale farmer’s rights to produce food following ecological processes and based on farmer’s knowledge and innovations. This is what is claimed in the Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology (or Nyéléni Declaration). The Declaration was made by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, which represents more than 6000 small-scale food producer organisations worldwide. Control over the food system is at the heart of the issue. This means control over all aspects, ranging from land, water and seeds to end-products, production techniques and knowledge. This article illustrates how agroecology and its inherent challenge of people’s control over food and land can also be applied in an urban context.

Gardening in Rome

Rome has an unusually large share of green areas (67% of the Municipality) of which a great part is under protection (67% of the overall unbuilt land). It also has amount of wastelands. The city of Rome and its surroundings are hosts to an increasing number of urban farms and vegetable gardens. Living up to their reputation, Romans are looking for fresh and quality products and are setting up diverse ways to bypass conventional food systems. Grassroots initiatives such as gardens and farms, as well as direct sales on-farm, farmers’ markets and purchasing groups are thus rapidly spreading.

Urban gardens Tre Fontane

The “Orti urbani Tre Fontane” gardens have been launched by a group of residents setting up a formal organisation. They submitted their project to the municipality, which rented them an abandoned plot for one year, renewable. For its members, the collective dynamic and the creation of a self-managed space are as important as food production itself.

The area is divided into individual plots and a collective space with fruit trees, a children’s playground, tables and chairs and an apiary. The collaboration with a school makes the educational garden very lively. In 2015 a campaign called “adopt a tree” was launched and promoted old varieties of trees or those threatened with extinction.

“New agriculture” farm

The peri-urban farm of Agricoltura Nuova was created in 1977 by a group of young people occupying land threatened by a construction project. Saving a natural area was the rationale for the community to develop the project, and to build an organic and multifunctional farm.

Today the agroecological initiative has a pizzeria, an equestrian centre, a picnic area, an impressive vegetable garden and a direct sales counter. This educational farm, with its apiary, cattle and poultry managed in synergy with the vegetable garden, enhances biodiversity (see also article in *Urban Agriculture Magazine 29* www.ruaf.org/short-food-chains-rome-context-experiences-policy-implications).



Urban farmers celebrate the “Archaic wheat festival”
Photo by Maria Caterina Feole ©

A recent trend, asked for by social organisations, has led the city of Rome to take a role and set rules for urban gardening. In 2013, several organisations launched a petition asking for public recognition of “social and shared gardens”. In July 2015, City Hall approved a new regulation on urban gardens, stating that the public spaces can be rented for free, on a renewable basis, by organisations having legal personality. The regulation also provided for the development and maintenance of urban gardens in Rome. It states that the gardens should be 100% organic and exclusively grown for self-consumption. In other words, the products cannot be sold, while the recreational and education dimensions are fostered. This supportive provision of public land is one key step. Nevertheless, to date it is still the only incentive or support coming from either the Municipality of Rome or the Lazio Region to promote urban or peri-urban ecological farms and gardens.

Despite weak public-sector involvement, many informal groups and organisations restore and manage these numerous abandoned public spaces, creating collective dynamics and retaking control of their living environment. Growing one’s own food seems in many cases to be closely linked to the desire to create new and self-managed spaces. This also fosters new forms of democracy through collective control over public spaces and food production. Although

involved gardeners usually do not claim to practice agroecology, several initiatives show strong links with agroecology as described in the Nyéléni Declaration. This will be discussed in the last section.

Agroecology and urbanity

Taking control of space and food through gardening in an urban context gives a very specific shape to agriculture. The proximity to the city and its high concentration of people provides a wide range of potentialities for agroecological gardens. This section will highlight the features that can emerge from the combination between agroecology and urban areas, based on observations of different experiences in Rome.

Taking control of both food and space: The collective ownership of abandoned public spaces is frequent in Rome. Citizens organise themselves to manage a piece of land in their environment that allows them, to some extent, to rely less on the more conventional food systems. The creation of a self-managed area is as important as producing food. This was explained by one of the founders of “Orti urbani Tre Fontane”, according to whom such initiatives are driven by strong desires both to avoid a more conventional way of living individually and to avoid eating “food from nowhere”.

Nyéleni Declaration	Roman experiences (based on observations)
Agroecology goes hand in hand with the efforts for building local food systems	The food produced is consumed by the community (cannot be sold)
Agroecology is a matter of autonomy for farmers and consumers	Citizens share knowledge, seeds and experiences that reduce their dependency on the conventional food system
Biodiversity, ecological practices, old varieties	Use of old varieties, apiary, integrating crops, trees, compost, flowers and favourable conditions for insects and pollinators are among the activities that enhance biodiversity
Farmer’s knowledge sharing	Educational gardens and activities. Partnership with schools. Building and sharing of local knowledge
Access to the Commons	Collective ownership of land triggers social interactions, and collective management of resources such as water, energy and seeds.



The horticulturists and neighbourhood residents have formed a musical band. Photo by Maria Caterina Feole ©

The social role of green spaces: The need for green spaces where neighbours can meet and children can play is well justified in a highly urbanised and populated environment. Flowers, insects and trees undoubtedly improve the quality of life in urban areas, while the garden promotes social interactions. An increasing number of studies are demonstrating the positive effects on health of a daily contact with nature, and this is especially true in areas with high biodiversity.

Biodiversity: Agroecological urban gardens promote higher species richness and urban biodiversity amongst residential blocks and roads. In some cases, bees and other pollinators may even find more favourable conditions in cities, compared to some countryside areas with monocultures and chemically-treated fields. Moreover, the social compared to the productive role of urban gardens makes them quite suitable for experimenting with non-conventional crops such as low-production or ancient varieties.

Education: Many agroecological urban gardens in cities play an important educational role. The proximity of schools facilitates children's participation to gardening activities. While benefitting from the many positive effects of nature, it also brings them an opportunity to learn about plant and animal species, composting, plants interactions, insects, natural pest control, water management, traditional knowledge and so on. Being almost always directed to children, these educational activities also have the potential to be expanded to broader audiences.

What can we learn from the Roman experiences?

The Roman experiences show that urban areas are already a place for agroecology as described in the Nyéléni Declaration. Distinctive features that characterise agroecology as understood by small-scale farmer's organisations worldwide are effectively present in Rome. These common features described below can be considered as guidelines to promote and enhance agroecology efforts in cities.

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