

# ONZE urban greenhouse: cultivating connections, harvesting success

Darleen van Dam

**This article explores the benefits of urban agriculture, focusing on ONZE, an urban greenhouse that rents gardens to allotment gardeners. ONZE serves as an example of how urban agriculture can generate positive social and economic outcomes for both the owner and the gardeners of the urban greenhouse. By examining ONZE's unique features and achievements, we can gain valuable insights into the benefits of allotment gardens under glass, based on practical experiences.**



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Located in the city of Almere near Amsterdam (the Netherlands), ONZE provides the opportunity for gardeners to lease a plot in a greenhouse. Plots are available at a nominal fee that ranges from €30 to €90 per month, depending on the plot's size (typically around 35 m<sup>2</sup>). The greenhouse serves as a hub for urban agriculture enthusiasts and promotes organic farming amongst the gardeners, enhancing the benefits of urban agriculture in terms of sustainability and health.

Ron van Zwet is the owner of ONZE, which he started about ten years ago. Following some challenging start-up years, he built a vibrant business with a staggering 1400 allotment gardens. Today, Ron is a knowledgeable entrepreneur who not only oversees the greenhouse but also serves as the face of the company. Ron takes the time to walk around the allotment gardens, engaging with gardeners and sharing his expertise on biological control and other gardening practices. He instills confidence in

gardeners by explaining how beneficial insects play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem, effectively controlling pests without the need for harmful pesticides. "We know it will be alright," he says, emphasizing the self-healing, organic approach employed at ONZE.

Ron distinguishes two types of urban agriculture: commercial urban agriculture, which prioritizes profitability; and subsidized agriculture, which relies on maintenance and can lead to dwindling interest over time. Clearly favouring the commercial approach, Ron's entrepreneurial motivation at ONZE was to establish a profitable venture centred around horticultural allotment gardens — and he has succeeded. One factor contributing to Ron's success is the benefit of cultivating crops under glass, which provides a more stable climate. The high interest from gardeners is driven by the opportunity to grow throughout the year and cultivate tropical plants, like



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sopropo, bolognese eggplants, and peppers, that thrive in the greenhouse environment.

Alongside the economic benefits, ONZE produces the numerous social benefits typical of community agriculture. Social connections flourish within this community, with new friendships often blossoming among like-minded individuals. Workshops and informative sessions facilitate peer-to-peer learning, fostering a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration. Gardeners can learn valuable insights about plant cultivation simply by engaging in conversations with their neighbouring gardeners. Furthermore, the financial benefits of the allotment gardens are evident, as growing vegetables for themselves proves to be more cost-effective than buying food from the supermarket.



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What sets ONZE apart is its vibrant and inclusive social environment that embraces multiculturalism. For Surinamese individuals accustomed to having their own gardens, the presence of ONZE brings a sense of joy and familiarity. These gardeners appreciate the opportunity to cultivate their own vegetables (e.g. long beans, specific hot peppers, bitter gourd etc.) year-round, following traditional farming practices they are accustomed to. Additionally, Ron grows vegetables from Suriname and sells them in the farmers' shop, meeting the demands of the Surinamese community in Almere. ONZE's emphasis on organically grown Surinamese vegetables makes it the only shop in

the Netherlands that offers such produce, attracting customers from all over the region. The ability to provide these unique crops has not only created a niche market but also generated an additional revenue stream for the owner of ONZE.



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All in all, ONZE exemplifies the potential of urban agriculture. Ron's initial motivation was to create a business in his greenhouse that maximized profits and benefited consumers. However, he was pleasantly surprised by the social benefits his concept unlocked. Witnessing the pleasure and contentment that gardening activities bring to people's lives has made him immensely proud. The positive energy in the greenhouse is contagious, which is certainly due to the social benefits, including new friendships, peer-to-peer learning, and the provision of healthy and diverse vegetables. The success of ONZE has even led to its expansion to the nearby city of Utrecht further solidifying its positive impact.

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**More information**

- ONZE volkstuinten <https://onzevolkstuinten.nl/>