

Vivid ecosystem supports urban farming in Brussels

The Brussels Capital Region has played a vital role in supporting a vivid urban agriculture sector in the heart of Europe. Starting from a clear strategy, various actors and organisations are collaborating to support new and existing urban farmers. This ecosystem of facilitators and the links between them is a great example that could inspire many other urban regions.

It starts with a clear vision

The Brussels Capital Region comprises 19 municipalities, including the City of Brussels. The region supports the urban agriculture sector within the framework of the Good Food Strategy, which aims at a real transition to a sustainable food system. Between 2016 and 2020, the number of professional growers doubled from 20 (with a surface area of 5 hectares) to 43, of which 27 full soil vegetable growers, one fruit grower, two sheep farmers, one hop farmer, six zero acreage farms (two mushroom, two microgreens, two vegetables/herbs) and two herbal tea plant growers.

Given the many beneficial effects that urban agriculture can generate (quality food, employment, reduction of the carbon footprint, awareness raising, etc.), several organizations have been mandated to provide personalized guidance to practitioners, so that they are better equipped and can develop their activity.

Central platform for questions

Established in 2018, the Brussels Facilitator for Urban Agriculture is a portal that provides information and mentoring services for the development of urban agriculture¹. The website is invaluable for gathering information through thematic info sheets and frequently asked questions (FAQ). It is an important starting point for everyone who wants to get started with food production in a city environment.

Since availability of land is challenge number one, the services of the facilitator portal have shifted to support owners and project developers, as well as public authorities and communities. A knowledgeable network of multidisciplinary experts and organizations is available to inspire, inform and guide these actors. The goal is to implement food production in both existing and planned neighbourhoods and buildings, which may then provide space for professional agricultural production and/or citizen vegetable gardens.

Local Economy Office for urban farming

Professional farmers and entrepreneurs can connect with the Local Economy Office's *Village Partenaire*², where they can obtain free advice and training on business models, market studies, financial plans, and communications support. The Local Economy Office collaborates with the Facilitator to provide expertise on urban planning, legal issues and production techniques. In the case of soil-based farms, the *Village Partenaire* also advises new farmers to start their business at the *Graines de Paysans* farm testing area located in the Brussels periphery (see below).

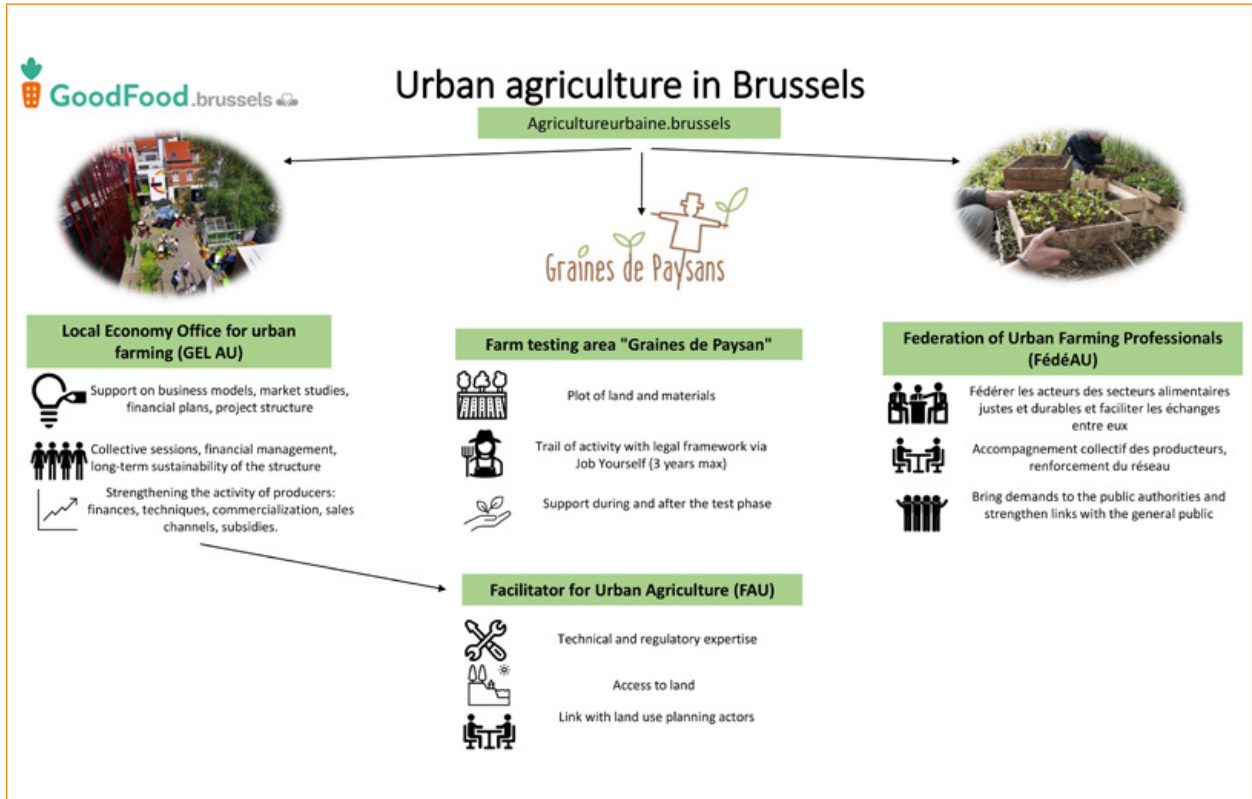
Federation of Urban Farming Professionals

The Federation of Urban Farming Professionals (FédéAU)³ was created at the end of 2020. Its purpose is to build a network between the pioneers of fair and sustainable food production systems and to facilitate exchanges between them, to develop collective services, to lobby the public authorities on their behalf and to strengthen bonds with the general public in the Brussels Capital Region and its periphery. FédéAU is an important broker of knowledge sharing between professional urban farmers and a sounding board for the Region's policy makers.

Farm testing area

The farm testing area *Graines de Paysans* enables new farmers to test their professional activity in a secure environment. During the test period, new farmers have access to a plot of land of between five and 30 acres, as well as the infrastructure and tools they will need to farm and sell their produce. The farmers are all completely independent and use different production methods (but all are certified organic), and different ways of selling (e.g. directly to consumers, to restaurants, or to shops, etc). Theoretically new farmers can spend up to three years at *Graines de Paysans*, but they often stay as long as five years because they cannot find land elsewhere.

This testing area was launched in 2016 with European funds granted under the *BoerenBruxselPaysans* project⁵. The mission of this project is to facilitate and increase local food production in the Brussels Capital Region, as



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well as processing according to ecological production methods, for the benefit of Brussels' consumers. It aims to promote access to quality food via short supply chains, to raise awareness of sustainable food in all its aspects, and to involve consumers in local food dynamics.

Finding land is the most difficult

Scarcity of land is a challenge in an urban environment. Governments have a role to play through their urban plans, but also landowners could be motivated to rent their land to farmers. In Brussels the organization *Terre en vue* is a movement of motivated citizens that takes this idea a step further by bringing together enough money to purchase agricultural land and then renting it to farmers for agro-ecological projects. The movement also advises other landowners (e.g. governments) on how to make this land available for food production.

Nele Lauwers is an expert in urban farming at Boerenbond.

References

1. Brussels Facilitator for Urban <https://www.agricultureurbaine.brussels/>
2. Village Partenaire <https://www.villagepartenaire.be/>
3. FédéAU <http://www.fedeau.be/>
4. Graines de Paysans <https://espace-test.be/graines-de-paysans/>
5. Terre en Vue <https://terre-en-vue.be/>