

RUSSIA

ROOFTOP GARDENING IN ST PETERSBURG

Even the most unusual vacant spaces in cities can be put to innovative uses, giving local people the means to develop additional sources of income, or to improve their living conditions. The rooftop gardening initiative in St Petersburg is one example of how people have been able to use idle space to supplement their diets and livelihoods.

St Petersburg, in Russia, with a population of 4.7 million, is situated on the delta of the Neva River and the Gulf of Finland. Since the onset of the economic and political reform process in Russia, many citizens have suffered hardships, at times even shortages of basic foodstuffs such as fresh vegetables. In response to this problem, the Urban Gardening Club (UGC), a local NGO, started the Roof Top Gardening Programme in 1993 with assistance from the US charity Educational Concerns for Hunger Organisation (ECHO).



Russia, which was largely an agrarian society until the turn of the last century, has a long history of urban gardening.

Traditionally, urban residents cultivated vegetables at

their 'dachas' (small plots with houses in peri-urban areas, or in the country). According to the Regional Union of Horticulturalists, there are two million Russians that grow vegetables on dacha plots. However, only wealthy, or fortunate city dwellers have access to dachas, while most residents in St. Petersburg live in apartment blocks, without garden space. The UGC and ECHO overcame this problem by developing methods for gardening on spaces available in the city centre, specifically on the flat roof tops of apartment buildings. Such rooftops were private unused spaces and were protected from vandalism.

The initiative was tried out on two rooftops in 1993. One was at the Lengiprovodchov

Institute, which was used as a demonstration garden. The other was in an apartment building with 540 residents. Residents volunteered to form a gardening group. In the first year, enough vegetables were grown to feed people in the residential block and some of their neighbours. At the same time, the air became noticeably cleaner, helping to reduce the level of pollution in the inner city. The vegetables grown were tested and showed lower levels of heavy metal contamination than those bought from city markets, or even those grown at a dacha, 30 km from the city.

The work of the demonstration garden was backed by extensive media coverage. UGC also produced various pamphlets on roof top gardening and distributed to officials an in-depth guidebook. As a result, many urban residents and organisations started their own rooftop gardens, (although the UGC does not have the capacity to document numbers).

Technically, the method used followed simple criteria. The growing shallow bed containers were made from light local materials, which were inexpensive to construct. Gardeners were discouraged from using local soil from parks or vacant land, as this was highly contaminated with heavy metals harmful to people's health. The growing season in this northern city was only four months. Yet, gardeners were able to grow leafy greens, herbs, tomatoes, potatoes and various other vegetables in adequate quantities.

So far, this initiative has been a popular success in St Petersburg, where flat, spacious, sturdy rooftops are the legacy of Soviet public housing. However, on government owned apartment blocks, employees responsible for upkeep and maintenance are sometimes resistant to such gardens, fearing damage to public buildings. This approach could also produce difficulties in some cities where water supplies are so



expensive that it is probably cheaper to buy vegetables from outside the city. Nevertheless, the garden scheme demonstrates that urban agriculture in many countries can be practiced successfully, both in the produce of healthy food and as a source of income for residents.



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for further information:
www.cityfarmer.org
www.who.dk/nutrition
www.idrc.ca/cfp/projects
www.wormwoman.com

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