

Gardening in Public Spaces: From Comfort to Care

Ignacio Farías, Kristiane Fehrs

ABSTRACT: *In recent years, many cities in Germany have reevaluated the role of urban gardening projects in the context of broader concerns with the sustainability of food systems. Using the example of three different urban gardening projects in Munich we take a look at obstacles, resistances and conflicts that urban gardening encounters when moving into open public spaces. Our inquiry seeks to address the following questions: What challenges do urban gardening projects face? Can they be integrated into open urban spaces? And, if so, what challenges do these projects pose to design ideals of urban public space? Gardening contradicts current norms and imaginaries of what constitutes a "good" public space, which is supposed to be designed for (human) comfort. We suggest that comfort in public spaces must be re-imagined as the outcome of active engagement in the production and maintenance of urban gardens and should include the production of a comfortable space for non-human urban inhabitants. We conclude that urban gardening promotes a careful and caring use of public space.*

KEYWORDS: *Urban Gardening, Urban Planning, Public Spaces, Comfort, Care, Munich*

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Introduction

In recent years, various urban policy programs have promoted urban gardening and food production projects in cities. These projects are lauded for their numerous ecosystem services, such as increasing biodiversity in cities by providing habitats for a variety of plants and animals, reducing air pollution by absorbing pollutants and releasing oxygen, improving soil quality by adding organic matter and nutrients, reducing the urban heat island effect by providing shade and evaporative cooling, increasing food security by providing access to locally grown produce, as well as serving as community-building spaces and promoting the mental health and well-being of city inhabitants. While these benefits are significant, as Jakob Laage Thomsen and Anders Blok (2020) have noted, urban greening and gardening projects are often associated with political practices and conflicts in urban areas. Thomsen and Blok suggest distinguishing six modes of civic engagement in urban greening projects, including using it as a means to fight for a neighborhood space, building

relationships with nature, building or stabilizing social relationships, laying the foundation for sustainable projects and social enterprises, resisting urban development policies, and promoting a sustainable, green future and transition. In a similar vein, Cordula Kropp (2019) describes urban gardening as a form of politicization of public space, demonstrating how diverse demands on public space are met through urban gardening and how urban gardens represent an expression of the post-growth movement. Kropp argues that food production plays “an opening function as it first makes people aware of the alienation from food and its production, as well as the fundamentally missing food sovereignty. Second, it reveals that both access to natural resources, to open spaces without consumption, and to public spaces for different groups of residents are unequal and limited.” (2019: 80, own translation)

One key aspect that warrants further examination is how practices of urban gardening challenge prevailing conceptions of public space by foregrounding practices of commoning and care as constitutive of the public sphere. While Blok and Laage Thomsen's and Kropp's studies analyze the conditions and motivations that lead to urban gardening, in this article we would like to focus on how gardening changes conventional practices and understandings of public space.

In recent years, many cities in Germany have reevaluated the role of urban gardening projects in the context of broader concerns with the sustainability of food systems. The framework “Productive Landscape” developed by the Senate Department for Urban Development and the Environment in Berlin is a prominent example: “The Productive Landscape combines agriculture, allotment gardens, subsistence farming with the do-it-yourself culture of interim users, space pioneers and start-ups. [...] Citizens take responsibility, are strengthened in their commitment and identify more and more with the greenery of the city.” (2017: 6, own translation) This framework highlights the potential of urban gardening as a means of urban farming, transforming urban food production systems, and empowering citizens and civic society associations. Beyond this, civic society actors have organized ‘food councils’ in various German cities with the aim of bringing the question of “Gutes Essen” back into politics. The 2018 Frankfurt Declaration of the Food Councils calls for the re-localization of urban food systems, emphasizing regional food supply (Frankfurt Declaration, 2018). This includes supporting existing and new urban gardening projects and embracing new concepts such as the ‘edible city,’ which involves having edible plants in public spaces for citizens to harvest¹.

In this article, we explore contemporary cases, where urban gardening and food production takes place in urban public spaces, thus contradicting current norms and imaginaries of what constitutes a “good” public space. We focus on the manifold obstacles, resistances and conflicts that urban gardening encounters when moving into open public spaces. Focusing on three such urban gardening projects in Munich, we unpack and analyze the key legal, social, and economic obstacles they confront as a result of their partial placement in public spaces. Through the lens of these minor practices, we aim to shed light on their deviation from conventional spatial arrangements of open community gardens, as well as from mainstream urban planning notions of public spaces designed for human leisure and consumption. By narrating the stories of these gardens, we aim to draw attention to how they challenge the notion of comfort as a primary design value in public spaces and elevate the importance of care in urban public spaces.

The significance of understanding the challenges posed by these urban gardening projects to the concept of public space, as well as the resistance and obstacles they face, cannot be overstated, particularly in light of ongoing planetary crises. As a practice that brings

food production – and with it practices of commoning and care – into public space, urban gardening has the potential to transform public spaces. Our inquiry seeks to address the following questions: What challenges do urban gardening projects face? Can they be integrated into open urban spaces? And, if so, what challenges do these projects pose to design ideals of urban public space? By addressing these questions, we aim to reimagine the future of green urban spaces.

Public Gardening in Munich

With these questions in mind, we take a look at ongoing urban gardening projects in Munich. In recent years, the practice of urban gardening in Munich has mainly been driven by self-organized civic society organizations. Two associations play a prominent role in promoting urban gardening in Munich through facilitating and supporting projects that are spread all over the city: *Urbane Gärten München* and *Green City!*. In 2011 five private foundations came together to form the cooperative initiative *Urbane Garten München*, with the primary aim of mapping and publicizing the scope, location, and significance of community gardens in Munich. This initiative not only serves as a guide for garden enthusiasts to find a garden near their home, but also highlights the many and diverse garden projects in Munich, as well as the high level of commitment of the actors involved, and the social and ecological importance of gardens. *Green City!* was founded in 1990 and is currently one of the most active non-profit environmental associations in the city. Its primary aim is to reduce motorized individual traffic and make Munich a greener and more livable city. Urban greening and gardening is one of the four key areas in which *Green City!* organizes activities and projects, and manages several community gardens with different modes of citizen participation.

There are many urban gardening projects in Munich, as overview maps provided by *Urbane Gärten München* and *Anstiftung* (a foundation that supports urban gardens throughout Germany) highlight². The two maps give different numbers of urban gardening projects in Munich though. While *Urbane Gärten München*'s map shows approximately 137 entries in the greater Munich area, the map by *Anstiftung*'s shows around 47 gardens (as of summer 2019). This discrepancy highlights that documenting urban gardens can be challenging on several levels. On the one hand, urban gardens are often in temporary use and must find new spaces after a few years. On the other hand, the question arises as to what types of projects and locations are documented. *Anstiftung* focuses on community or intercultural gardens, that is, gardens that tend to prioritize the creation of communal spaces and accessibility to gardens within the community, as well as gardens that prioritize cultural exchange and the cultivation of plants and vegetables from different countries. These practices contribute to the diversity of allotment landscapes and urban gardening, as they reflect the unique growing practices of both non-migrant and migrant communities (Gerodetti & Foster 2015). *Urbane Gärten München* also includes allotment gardens, mostly in fenced private land, and herb gardens (*Kräutergarten*), i.e. small fields on the outskirts of the city that can be privately cultivated. One element that these different types of gardens have in common is that they are mostly located in enclosed urban spaces, that is spaces you enter through a door or gate. As Sainz de los Terreros (2021) has described in detail, the politics and practices of opening, closing and accessing community spaces is often mediated by having access and sharing responsibility to the keys of the doors and gates that temporarily render such private spaces into public ones. In the

case of Munich, urban gardens are in most cases not situated on public spaces or urban squares, with a few exceptions, such as Zenetti Platz, where neighbors supported by the city administration have created a garden with fresh greenery and blooms, and taken responsibility for maintaining, watering, and weeding the green areas.

In this article, we undertake a focused investigation into urban gardening initiatives that operate in spaces accessible to the public, relinquishing control over who may access the garden and how it is used. We are interested in thinking about gardens in a tradition closer to that of guerrilla gardening, where planting on all possible urban spaces raises questions about the right to shape the city (cf. Reynolds, 2010). But in the case of urban gardening in public spaces, the lack of control becomes particularly sensitive as these projects often involve a caring commitment and long-term relationship to plants and the place itself. Thus, our inquiry centers on how this condition of urban publicity poses challenges to urban gardening projects.

Simultaneously, by emphasizing practices of commoning and care these projects challenge conventional notions of public spaces that revolve around an ideal of 'comfortable' spaces. To this end, we focus on three urban gardening projects in Munich, namely *O'Pflanzt is!*, Bahngarten, and *Giesinger Grünsplatz*. These three gardens differ in terms of their organizational structures (independent and self-organized, affiliated with an institution, initiated by an association) and their spatial contexts (located in a park, front yards and backyards of institutions, and interim use of empty sites). We conducted interviews with representatives of these gardens to understand how the gardeners' work is organized and identify the challenges posed by gardening in public spaces. By using these projects as case studies, we investigate how urban gardening can alter our understanding of public space quality.

O'Pflanzt is! – The Problem of Universal Access

The urban gardening project *O'Pflanzt is!* sees gardening as a political practice that seeks to establish an alternative future to the monopolization of food production, as reflected in their statement: "The future of world nutrition increasingly depends on the profit interests of a few corporations."³ Gardening at *O'Pflanzt is!* is considered an experimental and experiential practice of communal and ecological food production, while also serving as an educational tool to raise awareness about the economic and political issues surrounding food production. The gardening group collaborates with schools and other educational institutions to promote plant and vegetable cultivation knowledge.

The garden was founded in 2011, when one of the initiators leased a fallow plot of land at Emma-Ihrer-Straße in Munich from the Free State of Bavaria and established the non-profit association. The garden thrived at this location from 2011 to 2018 until the lease was terminated by the Bavarian State to make way for a public construction project. With this decision, the search for a new site and thus the question of integrating urban gardening into urban open space became a primary concern for *O'Pflanzt is!*. Even though the garden community was supported by (some) local politicians, finding a new location proved to be an extremely difficult task. In a motion dated October 12, 2017, the city council fractions of the green party, the ecological democratic party, and the left party (Grüne, ÖDP, and Linke) urged the Munich Mayor to actively and promptly support the search for a replacement site for the community garden project *O'Pflanzt is!* and to ask the Free State of Bavaria for a reprieve in clearing the site. The response to this motion followed two years later in

March 2019 and shows that the question of who is responsible for allocating land to urban gardens is unresolved: The Department of Urban Planning argued that the matter falls outside its responsibility because "this urban garden has no fundamental significance for the city." (own translation) It further added that only the Municipal Department (*Kommunalreferat*) has available land and claimed that their efforts to find a replacement site have been unsuccessful due to the requirements that are too high.

The process highlights how urban gardening projects are pushed to resettle in open public spaces, especially due to the current densification of urban areas and the increasing filling of vacant sites. If the future of urban gardening lies on the streets, parks, and squares of our cities, the story of the relocation of O'Pflanzt is! reveals that the lack of an appropriate legal framework for urban gardens in Munich might represent one of the largest obstacles. The difficulty in allocating public land to urban gardens primarily lies in the clash between the requirements for public spaces and those for urban gardens – this is what the *Planungsreferat* implied when writing that requirements for a site for O'Pflanzt is! were too high. The soil was not to be contaminated, so that plants could be planted directly into the ground and ensure the edibility of grown herbs and vegetables; matters which were responsibility of the Department of Health and Environment. Another requirement was that the site should be both open and accessible, but at the same time it should have a fence, so that dogs would not pollute the site. However, the 'protection' of the garden – from the planning department's point of view – would imply an exclusion of the public from public space and count as an impermissible privatization of public space. This tension between protecting areas designated for urban agriculture and preserving the legal nature of public space remains a fundamental challenge for urban gardening projects and made the search for a replacement site particularly difficult. In 2018 O'Pflanzt is! became a "community garden without a garden"⁴⁴ and only after a year-long search the association found a new location on the private land of a Montessori School.

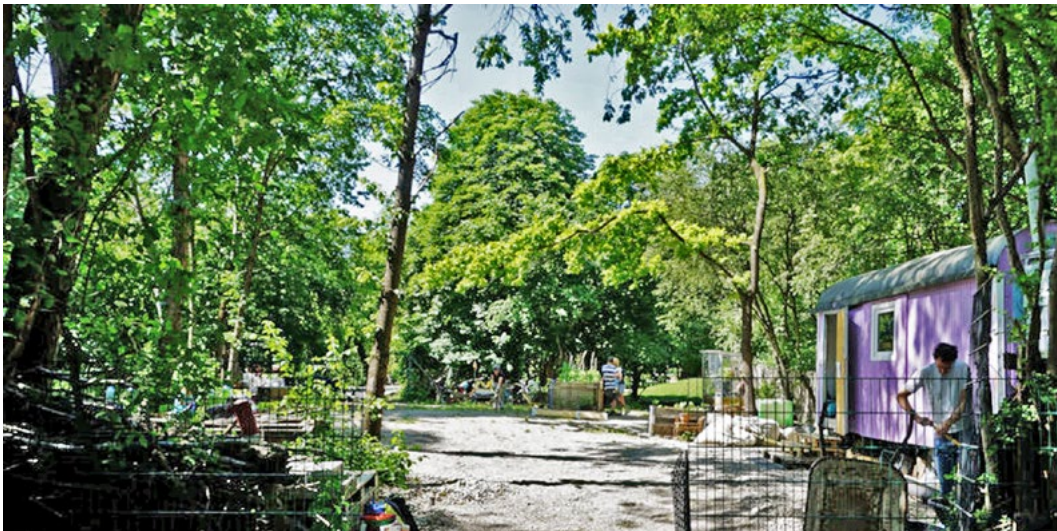


Fig. 1. New location of O'Pflanzt is!

The story highlights the need of a legal framework that enables the integration of urban gardens into public spaces. While the allocation of individual or interim spaces may be a feasible solution, it is not a sustainable one. In February 2023, the Munich city council commissioned the Department of Urban Planning to collaborate with municipal housing associations and social organizations to integrate urban gardening and urban agriculture

into current urban development plans. The Department of Urban Planning is expected to secure areas for urban gardening in four pilot projects and define further locations. However, it remains to be seen how urban gardens will be integrated into public spaces in new developments. The tension between protecting areas designated for urban agriculture and preserving the legal nature of public space remains a fundamental challenge. The following example suggests that this challenge is not only a legal one.

Bahngarten – The Problem of Comfortable Stay

The Bahngarten is a part of the Bahnwärter Thiel, a private cultural project located at a former railway site in the slaughterhouse district of Munich. This site has been in temporary use since 2015. In the summer of 2019, the organizers of Bahnwärter Thiel, with the support of the Urbane Gärten Munich network and the district, constructed an urban garden consisting of approximately 40 raised beds. These raised beds were either allocated to individual stewards, known as *Beetpaten*, or designated as communal beds tended to by everyone. Although the garden is institutionally connected to the Bahnwärter Thiel and partially hidden behind old containers, it is located in a publicly accessible space without fences or other control mechanisms.



Fig. 2. Bahngarten

The public nature of the garden enables its appropriation by various groups. A key tension results from the coexistence of two sets of practices connected to day and night time uses of the garden. During most days, the garden is tended to by a community of gardeners who use it with varying degrees of intensity and commitment. During the weekends and especially at night, the garden is utilized by individuals attending cultural events and, in particular, by those visiting a night club located in the same area. Additionally, Bahnwärter Thiel is home to a very active graffiti scene that spends time in the garden while spraying

containers and walls. The overlapping of different uses and conceptions of public space becomes apparent in different ways, as a representative of the Bahngarten team reports. This includes littering, vandalism, and even the destruction of plants, making them inedible due to pollution. Gardening in public spaces involves managing such risks, and the gardeners at Bahngarten are well aware of them. They have developed practices of tending to the plants while simultaneously addressing the issue of managing the multiplicity of the site. This involves understanding litter removal as an integral part of gardening, as well as raising awareness about the garden as a matter of collective care.

These various uses of the garden express different notions of public space. Some practices enact the garden as a public facility that supports their activities (clubbing, graffiti) without needing to engage in or take responsibility for the production or maintenance of the material qualities of the space itself. Conversely, other practices, especially those of the gardeners, involve not only the care of raised beds but also concern for the overall design and maintenance of the space. In the former case, the quality of the space is associated with the provision of a comfortable infrastructure or 'infrastructure of comfort', while in the latter case, the quality of the space is not taken as a given but rather results from engaging with the garden as a matter of care.

In 2019, by the time of research, and only a few months after the opening of the garden, it was still unclear how successfully these different uses and notions of the garden as a public space could be articulated in the long term, as conflicts of use have already led some gardeners to give up their beds and move to less accessible locations. This trend highlights the significance of the question of long-term commitment from gardeners, which is a crucial issue in the following story.

Giesinger Grünspitz – The Problem of Long-Term Commitment

Giesinger Grünspitz is located at the intersection of Tegernseer Landstraße and Martin-Luther-Straße in Munich Giesing (as the name of the project gives away). It is a small area that has been in public hands since 2014 and has since been used as a temporary space for cultural and artistic events. It also includes an urban garden, that was initially tended to by several initiatives. The gardening project is physically divided into two main areas. Throughout the site, raised beds with different plants were installed, which are publicly accessible and taken care of by members of the gardening community. In addition, in a fenced area, further raised beds were installed and allocated to individuals for a flexible fee of up to €50 per season. Before the introduction of the fee, the urban gardening project had been struggling with the number of people committing to the gardening. Especially in summer, when plants needed to be watered twice a day, it became clear that the regular maintenance continued to be carried out by a rapidly decreasing number of volunteers – as one of those volunteers coming from *Kulturverstrickungen e.V.* – one of the organizations that had started the gardening project at *Giesinger Grünspitz* – told us. With the introduction of the fee, the garden at the *Giesinger Grünspitz* aimed to experiment with different forms of responsibility for plant beds and greenery, introducing a monetized logic of sponsorship to the voluntary engagement of its members. Yet the hoped-for model of 'bed sponsorship' did not work out as well as expected: The number of gardeners from the neighborhood remained low. At some point, after only a few volunteers carried for too long the entire burden of responsibility, *Kulturverstrickungen* left the project. Their website captures that moment in a last blog post that emphasizes the commitment encountered in other urban



Fig. 3. Giesinger Grünsplatz

gardens: “almost all of our plants have now been taken away from Grünsplatz and are being properly cared for, nurtured, and especially watered in new garden projects.”⁵

The story of the garden at Giesinger Grünsplatz makes apparent how difficult it is to create conditions for the enrolment of neighbours, communities and initiatives in collective urban gardening projects. More importantly, the question it poses is whether and how gardens can be established in the long term, after the first of civic enthusiasm recedes, without financial resources available for securing paid maintenance work. Today *Giesinger Grünsplatz* as well as its garden is coordinated by *Green City e.V.* by means of an agreement with the City of Munich. In spring 2023 the *Giesinger Grünsplatz* website welcomed the new gardeners: “Do you have a bed for the first time this year? Then come by and meet the group! The coordinators will also be there with tips and shovels to start the gardening year together!”⁶ This new arrangement differs from the previous experiment with the sponsorship fee. Instead of trying to secure long-term commitment by giving a sense of private ownership, the maintenance of the garden and the engagement of the public is now supported with paid coordinators, thus building an infrastructure from below for supporting and implementing long-term relations between people and the garden.

Reimagining public space as a matter of care

We started this article asking how can public space be thought of as a space not only for mobility, leisure and consumption, but also for commoning and care work. We have looked at three urban gardening projects that are located in open urban spaces in Munich, paying attention not only to the challenges that these projects pose to traditional notions of public space but also to how their public condition challenges urban gardening practices.

Richard Sennett was the first to discuss the association of the philosophical notion of a modern public sphere, as developed by Arendt or Habermas, with the streets and squares of cities in his classic book *The Fall of Public Man* (sic). Sennet (1977) argued that if the essential aspect of a public space is enabling encounters among strangers, then modernist urbanism, with its focus on smooth mobility and the continuous circulation of people, risks

bringing the end of public space. Central to this notion of public space is immobility, the act of staying put, as it creates conditions for people to spend free time in public spaces, fostering encounters among strangers. This vision of lively urban public spaces has gained prominence in contemporary urbanism, particularly since the 1980s when urbanists, such as Jan Gehl (2011), began developing international practices aimed at enabling public life in urban spaces. Significantly, Sennett's vision of public space builds on Hannah Arendt's (1958) distinction between 'labour' understood as a bodily reproductive activity, 'work' understood as an organized productive activity, and 'action' understood as a public communicative activity.

Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent that the recent invention of urban public space stems from a long historical process of banning or invisibilizing reproductive and productive work from it. It is in this context that we explore gardening practices as a conceptual challenge to the imaginaries and architectures of modern public space and public life. The website of the Munich Building Department, for example, states: "Accessible to all, these public spaces offer space for relaxation, recreation or movement" (own translation). This reflects such conventional notion of public spaces, which describes recreation, consumption and comfort as central aspects for bettering the quality of urban spaces. From this perspective, productive activities or care work are not seen as a form of qualitatively valuable stay. This view of public space is also at the core of the current understanding of green infrastructures, such as the 2015 Green Book "Green in the City. For a Livable Future" of the German Federal Ministry of Environment (BMUB). Apart from providing ecosystem services, urban green spaces are fundamental to human quality of life, and need to be designed in such a way that the future maintenance effort is limited. Urban green appears here as an urban amenity that should bring as much comfort as possible. This conception of comfortable green public spaces builds a stark contrast to the practices of gardening in public spaces, as it negates the role of (re)productive work as an integral part of what constitutes public space.

The architectural historian Daniel A. Barber postulates that we live in a 'Comfortocene' and describes the modernistic imperative of designing for comfort as closely entangled with the current climate crisis. In his view, the challenge of confronting the climate crisis "requires dramatically changing the terms by which we value a building, landscape, or public space" (Barber 2019: 50) and proposes to rethink urban and architectural design for 'life after comfort'. Our case studies resonate strongly with Barber's critique and allow us to identify two key conceptual inversions that are needed for the integration of urban gardens in public spaces.

The first one is the challenge that urban gardening pose to the notion of universal access that underlie the modern notion of public space. In the case discussed above, urban gardening projects cannot be located on public lands, because they need enclosures and protections that would limit the universal access to the space. In view of the gardeners, there lacks a legal framework that would allow public administrations to allocate public lands to urban gardening projects. Challenging this notion entails two aspects. The first one is reimagining public spaces as commons. The commons is not a model of universal inclusion of individual subjects or citizens, but rather a model of communal cooperation, where the subject at stake is not an anonymous individual citizen, but a situated collective that takes responsibility for the communal use of a space, which might entail defining rules of access and non-access. The second aspect is reimagining public spaces as ecologies. Urban gardening projects pose the question about the access and quality urban soils, for they refigure public space as an ecological niche, where humans and nonhumans,

especially plants and insects, can thrive thanks to their collaboration. Thus, rather than simply turning the public space into an eventually intensive productive landscape, urban gardening projects break with the anthropocentrism of modern public space and refigures it as a space for the reproduction of more-than-human collectives.

The second challenge pertains to the concept of green public spaces as spatial facilities provided and maintained by municipal or state authorities. This understanding of green public spaces is grounded in a specific notion of human comfort, wherein public spaces ought to facilitate the movement, recreation, and relaxation of urban residents. This conception has a long history dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when city parks were established to counteract the alienation of working-class communities. As the urban space was primarily associated with industrial production and work, then the park was to be the space for leisure and respite after a long week of labor. In the present context, the challenge lies in revising and reformulating these conventional notions and practices of green public spaces. The cases we have presented suggest that three reconfigurations of public spaces are required.

Firstly, comfort in public spaces must be re-imagined as the outcome of active engagement in the production and maintenance of urban gardens. The recreation of urban residents does not necessarily involve a relaxed and mindless use of spatial facilities, but rather gardening activities that are not subjugated to a productivist approach aimed at generating the maximum produce. Instead, urban gardens can open up spaces for a different kind of engagement with urban nature based on a stewardship relationship.

Secondly, the notion of comfort must be broadened to include the production of a comfortable space for non-human urban inhabitants. Gardening in public spaces necessitates viewing the space from the perspective of the plants and insects that inhabit these ecologies. Creating a comfortable space for non-human actors might entail a less comfortable space for human actors, thus requiring a constant negotiation of diverse notions of comfort. Such negotiation redefines public space as a political space that fosters encounters across difference. In this context, difference refers not only to socio-political backgrounds and views of human actors but also to ontologies across multi-species encounters.

The third and final challenge involves redefining public spaces as collective matters of care. This is particularly relevant for visitors or passers-by, who must take responsibility for the communal space. Negotiating careful and careless practices in public spaces and raising awareness about their importance as matters of care is integral to public space. Urban gardening, therefore, promotes a careful, caring, and nurturing use of public space.

Notes

- 1 Andernach was the first city in Germany to implement the idea of an edible city in 2010. The aim of the redesign was to make the city's green spaces more tangible, not only visually but also through smell and taste. Similarly, the platform [mundraub.de](https://www.mundraub.de) supports the idea of the Edible City by mapping fruit and nut trees, berry bushes, and edible herbs in urban areas for citizens to pick and harvest.
- 2 Maps can be checked here: <https://urbane-gaerten-muenchen.de/netzwerk-urbane-gaerten-muenchen/garten-karte-3/> and <https://urbane-gaerten.de/urbane-gaerten/gaerten-im-ueberblick>
- 3 See <https://o-pflanzt-is.de/>
- 4 "Gemeinschaftsgarten ohne Garten" <https://o-pflanzt-is.de/pressemeldung/>
- 5 <https://kulturverstrickungen.de/Grnspitz>
- 6 <https://www.greencity.de/event/29277-2/>

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