

National Report

Community Gardens and Climate Change in Austria

A review of Community Gardens' activities in climate change adaptation, environmental education and their potentials for future climate strategies.

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1. Introduction

In July 2022 234 gardening projects are listed on Gartenpolylogs “Gartenkarte”, a platform for community gardens all over Austria, 168 defining themselves as community gardens. (Gartenpolylog, 2022) Presumably many more exist, which might only be listed on regional network sites or are gardening together without being connected to any platform. The majority of Austrian community gardens are organised as closed groups sharing the space of a garden. Most of them consist of individual beds for their members and some commonly used spaces and infrastructure. Some garden groups practise collective gardening and share the harvest among members. Only few gardens are open to the public at any time but many have at least a few days a year when they open their doors for visitors or are generally open whenever a member is present.

Community gardens in Austria have different goals such as fostering neighbourhood relationships, encouraging contact with nature, self-sufficiency, intercultural encounter and political engagement. Also the target groups differ from garden to garden. There are neighbourhood gardens, girls’ gardens, women’s gardens, intercultural gardens and community gardens with different thematic focuses like permaculture or environmental education that attract specific groups.

1.1. History and development of community gardens and community garden organisations

The idea of community gardening reached Austria in the beginning of the 21st century. At this time just a handful of community gardens existed. In 2007 Gartenpolylog (community gardening association) was founded to inform the Austrian society about community gardening, to help establish new projects and connect existing projects to enhance knowledge transfer. At that time first projects started in cooperation with the local government of Vienna on public grounds. At the same time private initiatives founded first gardens in different Austrian Cities, mostly with a focus on intercultural encounter. After a few years the base was set and more and more gardens developed in cities, towns and villages all over Austria. They were initiated through citizens’ initiatives

as well as with support or through local governments. Recently community gardens become more and more part of new housing projects, are then part of private green space and reserved for the inhabitants. Beside Gartenpolylog (that acts nationwide as a network platform and initiates projects in Vienna) many other organisations started to promote community gardens in their federal states. Some like Bodenbündnis in upper Austria, Natur im Garten in lower Austria and Garteln in Wien or Gebietsbetreuungen in Vienna are funded by the regional government and have paid staff to support community gardens and offer counselling and educational activities. Others like Forum Urbanes Gärtnern in Graz or Blattform in Salzburg are civic society organisations with an activist approach and act more on a city level. Regional networking activities are organised by these organisations. At the same time some regions have still no organisations but only single gardens or a loose network of active gardeners or garden groups.

The nationwide network is not formally organised. Gartenpolylog organises an annual networking conference together with regional partner organisations - each year in a different region of Austria. In addition with its website it has established a platform, where community gardens can present themselves on the garden map, use the marketplace for exchange of goods and services and with the newsletter get regular information on community gardening activities all over Austria.

1.2. Perception in society

City development plans of major cities in Austria mention urban gardening and describe it as a measure to improve the cities social and ecological qualities (see Magistrat der Stadt Wien, 2014; Stadt Graz Stadtplanung 2012, Magistrat der Stadt Salzburg 2008). Many educational and socio-political organisations like Umweltberatung or lokale Agenda promote community gardens as tools for environmental education and enhanced social cohesion (Umweltberatung, 2022; Lokale Agenda OÖ, 2022)

At the same time urban gardening and especially community gardens are criticised as part of neoliberal city development, and said to improve neighbourhoods and thereby enhance gentrification. (see Kumnig et al. 2017) Another point of critique is the privatisation of public space *“as community gardens are only used by more or less closed groups of people.”* (participant Round Table Vienna)

1.3. Climate Change in Austria

Continental areas - like the east of Austria - will face heat extremes and a reduction of summer rainfalls and mountainous areas - to be found more in the centre and the western part - will experience above average increase of temperatures (EEA, 2016). Summers will become more hot and dry, days with temperatures above 30°C might double. Winters will be less cold and less snow is to be expected. Longer periods of droughts and at the same time more frequent heavy rainfalls will appear (Österreichs digitales Amt, 2022). In the community gardens participating in the online survey the changes perceived most often are longer periods of droughts (71%), followed by earlier start of the planting season (39%) and more pests and diseases (36%).

2. Current Situation in the Respective Country

2.1. Adaptation to Climate change

Community gardens make a valuable contribution to climate change adaptation through “infiltration areas, higher biodiversity e.g. through flower meadows, circular economy, water saving and collection”. (participant Focus Group) Furthermore, *“community gardens can contribute to sequester carbon in the soil through building up humus - through normal composting or plant charcoal”*. (participant Focus Group)

Community gardens are already doing a wide variety of activities to adapt their gardens to climate change. As answered in our questionnaire, more than 90% of the gardeners already work without synthetic chemical fertilisers and pesticides and three-quarters of all respondents attach great importance to the use of locally adapted plants, seeds and peat-free soil. Native plants, natural flora and wild corners with high biodiversity also find a place in the garden. Moreover composting and mulching are already practised in many gardens, and minimal soil cultivation and often green manure are used.

Furthermore shading and water management are two of the essential adaptation measures that are already being implemented in the community gardens. On the one hand, shading is provided by numerous greening measures such as wall and fence

greening, tree and woody planting, and the creation of hedges. In addition, structural measures such as arbours and pergolas are built. Water is brought into the garden through biotopes and ponds, and rainwater gets collected in the garden.

In addition, we found out that numerous other climate-friendly activities are carried out in the community gardens. More than 80% of all gardeners use soil, compost and mulch materials of regional origin. Repairing equipment and other items as well as recycling, upcycling and buying second-hand items are also of great importance for over two-thirds of the respondents. Besides, waste is professionally separated and the journey to the community garden is environmentally friendly if possible (on foot, by bike, etc.).

In the future, many community gardens plan to pay attention to drought-tolerant plants when selecting plants to grow but also to try out new irrigation systems. A major focus will also be on mulching (if not yet used). Trying out new/special forms of cultivation such as permaculture, agroforestry or vertical gardening are also planned for individual community gardens in the future.

There are many chances but also challenges for people gardening together. Community gardens as green infrastructure and habitat for both humans and diverse flora and fauna make a valuable contribution to climate change adaptation. The search for suitable land for the formation of new community gardens is often a major difficulty. Here too, networking with public institutions (municipalities, building committees, etc.) as well as with private individuals who could make land available (e.g. farmers) would be of great importance. But also the exchange between the individual community gardens is essential and can be seen as an opportunity for all gardeners.

As especially mentioned in our questionnaire, factors such as time constraints and few financial resources are also often significant challenges for community gardens. Financial support for the ongoing work but also for the founding of new community gardens would be essential. Coordinators from the public sector are needed here, who take care of the founding process, and support the further development of community gardens. This help is needed for the project development and land acquisition as well as for the care of existing gardens.

2.2. Environmental education

A community garden is a perfect place for environmental education. This is because it covers a wide range of environmental topics and enables interdisciplinary learning at all ages. Teaching and learning take place hand in hand and quite naturally through learning by doing. In addition to gardening know-how, a variety of social skills are taught. After all, the garden is a space of exchange in which the ability to engage in dialogue and compromise is learned. Moreover, *"the multiplying effect of community gardens is huge. There are the people, who garden, their environment and the neighbourhood of the garden as well as the organisations involved in the garden and their environment."*(participant Focus Group)

As we discussed in our focus group and round tables, community gardens are currently predominantly places of informal education. In the garden, regional and seasonal production is practised, a sustainable approach to food and natural resources is lived, as well as an appreciative attitude is trained and critical thinking is raised.

Related to climate change community gardens are places of self-efficacy where people can experience that they can change their environment and become active.

"This action-orientation is totally important...what can I contribute without being overwhelmed?...everyone can contribute". (participant Round Table online)

"Community gardens are for sure places of learning, because through my action I can create a cooler space, because I can maybe build a pergola, let plants grow on it and sit under it and feel that it is cooler." (participant Round Table vienna)

Especially in our questionnaire we noticed that in community gardens, environmental education is already being done and climate-friendly practices are implemented. So climate protection measures are automatically transported along with them. Often, people are not even aware of this connection with the climate and climate education measures, they simply do it. This learning from each other and exchange of information already takes place in three-quarters of the community gardens. In addition, 40% of the community gardeners stated in our questionnaire that environmental education also

takes place through information exchange in meetings and workshops outside their own garden as well as through workshops with external experts.

About one-fifth of the responding community gardens already have cooperations with other organisations in the field of environmental education. In our focus group and the round table we talked about good examples like Tyrol and the city of Graz. In Tyrol, there is already an educational catalogue for community gardens from the “Tiroler Bildungsforum”. In this educational catalogue, workshops, lectures, and other educational activities for community gardeners are offered on topics such as "soil and climate", "vegetables and fruit cultivation" or "processing the harvest". The City of Graz provides insight into gardens by offering “city climate tours” and “city walks” on the topic of climate change adaptation to various places of green infrastructure. Interested adults, as well as school groups are addressed as the target groups. In addition, many community gardens answered in the questionnaire that they offer courses and practical workshops on topics such as "building a dry stone wall" or "planting a flower meadow" and almost 70% of the community gardens organise open garden days as well as garden tours. In most cases, both the garden's members and interested external persons are invited to participate. Cooperation with educational institutions such as visits, guided tours, participation events for school classes and youth groups are also offered by one quarter of all community gardens. The topics of the workshops are very diverse, but most have a connection to climate change and climate change adaptation. For example, there are lectures and workshops on topics such as biodiversity, native plants, composting, mulching, and harvest processing.

As discussed in detail at the roundtable and confirmed in the questionnaire, there is a lot of potential and opportunities if community gardens are used as centres of environmental education.

“Well, there is the level of information, where you learn, the level of how to garden, and then also these networked connections, so also in the sense of empowerment, in the sense of strengthening strengths, and also in the sense of social skills, so finding a consensus. We also know that there is not one solution to the issue of climate change”.
(participant Round Table online)

In our questionnaire we asked community gardeners how they see the potential for environmental education in community gardens. The result is summarised in the following diagram:



0 = very low to 5 = very high

It can be seen that the majority of the community gardeners definitely see potential for environmental education in the garden. 50% see very high potential and another 25% of the community gardeners see high potential.

To work together with other organisations is very important, because through cooperation people can be reached (see also point 2.3) and new opportunities can arise. Networking in particular is very important.. In our questionnaire, we noticed that many community gardeners would like more networking with other community gardens. Gardeners would benefit greatly from this increased exchange of experiences and gardening knowledge. In addition, this would also be very helpful in promoting educational events and activities to reach a larger number of participants.

However, there are also many challenges that community gardens have to deal with when becoming a centre for environmental education. Especially if community gardens are used as places for formal education, good planning is needed, otherwise this could quickly become an overload for the gardens.

As analysed in the focus group, the local infrastructure is particularly important. It needs weather-independent event facilities such as seminar rooms or covered terraces

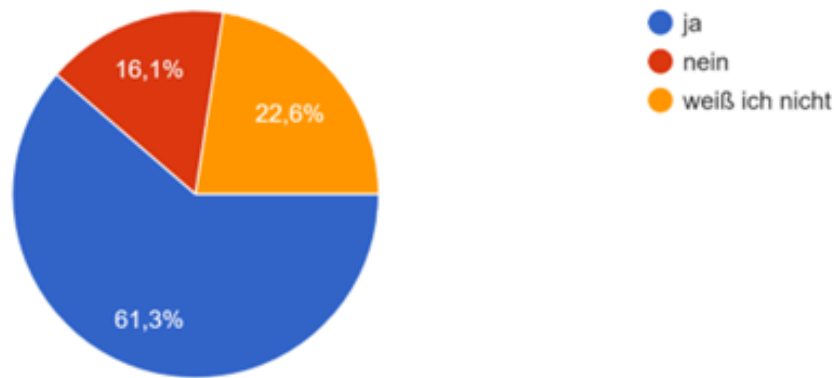
to be able to hold the courses/workshops in all weather conditions. In addition, the garden must be easily accessible by public transport or have enough parking space.

In our focus group we found out that it is essential to have reliable contact persons in the community garden and outside the garden when workshops are offered and organised by external educational providers. A particular challenge is often the promotion of the event, as it is not easy to reach a wider public. Therefore the cooperation with external education providers offers great advantages, as a network and application platforms are available and thus many more people can be reached. This would also save time for the people in the community gardens. Since all community gardeners do the work in their free time besides work and family, time is one of the most important limiting factors for the willingness to organise events and workshops as more than half of the asked community gardens answered in the questionnaire. However, opening the community gardens to external people is also a major issue. In about one quarter of the community gardens, there are gardeners that do not want to open their gardens to visitors. In our round table this topic was discussed in detail using the example of the city of Graz: *"CG should be a meeting place and a place of learning". (participant Round Table online)*

In the city of Graz, the opening of the community gardens is therefore a condition in the funding guidelines in order to promote exchange and networking as well as the transfer of information between community gardeners and visitors.

Also during the Vienna round table the openness of gardens was a major issue. All agreed that gardens have to be open especially to contribute to environmental education of the neighbourhood. At the same time there are no clear regulations or guidelines on a city level to claim a certain level of openness.

We found out in our questionnaire, that many community gardens would like to do more environmental education in their garden:



As shown in the diagram more than 60% (blue colour) of all community gardeners would be motivated to carry out more educational activities. In order to facilitate this, about 50% of community gardens would like to receive advice and training and financial support for the planning and implementation of events, workshops etc. In addition, more people who feel responsible are needed. Furthermore the provision of information material, as well as more support from the community, external garden advisors, platforms for application would be very valuable for the community gardens.

2.3. Cooperations with NGOs and decision makers

In our questionnaire, about 30% of the community gardens stated that they already have cooperations with local decision-makers. These include, among others, cooperations with municipalities, municipal garden offices, the magistrates of the cities as well as the municipal garden office (MA42 Vienna), Stadtentwicklung Agenda 21. But also companies such as the ÖBB (Austrian Federal Railways) are already mentioned as providers of land.

There are also numerous formal or informal cooperations with other organisations in the field of climate change/environment (in about 30% of the asked community gardens). These cooperations are for example with educational institutions such as schools and universities like the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna and other organisations and NGOs like BioAustria, Naturschutzbund,

Klimabündnis, Natur im Garten, Umweltberatung, Bodenseeakademie, Obst- und Gartenbauvereine, Tiroler Bildungsforum etc.

In our focus group representatives of different programs as KLAR (climate change adaptation model regions), KEM (climate and energy model regions for climate change mitigation) and LEADER (EU program for rural development) were present. All of them saw community gardens as relevant especially for climate change adaptation and saw a potential in the respective programs to foster community gardens and support their role as environmental education spaces. To create projects within those programs strong partnerships with municipalities or regional organisations have to be developed. Up to now community gardens are rarely part of climate change adaptation measures within these programs.

To gain space for community gardens the focus group participants suggested intensifying cooperations with municipalities, parishes, farmers and schools.

Cooperations with enterprises to establish community gardens for their employees and thereby sensitise them for ecological issues is a suggestion from both politicians and program leaders of KEM and KLAR. In terms of environmental education cooperations with adult education institutions were suggested by participants of round tables and the focus group. Especially the "Volkshochschulen" - adult education colleges all over Austria are seen as relevant partners for future activities.

To involve people who are not so much attracted by gardening cooperations with other initiatives like repair cafés are suggested. This might help to include people who are more interested in building and handicraft. To find out about the motivations of different groups of people to find alliances for the respective field can be helpful. Involving different organisations and initiatives in the garden helps to involve people with different backgrounds. These can be youth organisations, different neighbourhood initiatives or cultural organisations.

To bring knowledge about climate change and climate change adaptation into the gardens cooperations with the association for environmental protection or similar organisations are seen as useful.

To raise awareness of community gardens and their ecological impact among the general public including them into guided tours seems to be a useful approach (see

also above) Cooperations with specialised tour guides like the Austria Guides for Future were suggested.

3. Future Strategies

3.1. Anchor points to existing strategies

On a National level the climate change adaptation strategy covers different issues to which community gardens can contribute such as spatial planning and protection of the environment.

Many municipalities have started or are planning to develop their climate strategies. In a process of about one year municipalities analyse their situation and work on measures related to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Community gardens as green infrastructure as well as environmental education spaces could be part of these strategies. To reach this goal it seems essential to work with people supporting municipalities in their strategy development such as counsellors from climate alliance, energy efficient municipalities and alike. *“What I realised ... best practice examples are most relevant, so everywhere where you can make an event and excursions to best practices, it is a great opportunity to push the topic forward and subsequently also to get it into the climate change adaptation strategy of Upper Austria.” (participant Focus Group)*

The City government of Graz has defined becoming more democratic, more social and greener as the goals for the city. This includes creating diverse green spaces and therefore supporting community gardens on an organisational level and financially .

Looking at Vienna, the Urban Heat Islands Strategy, the InKA-Program (Infrastructure adaptation to climate change), the Klimafahrplan (climate roadmap) are relevant strategies. The climate roadmap, having a focus on cool public spaces, explicitly mentions neighbourhood gardens as one measure to create cool green areas with enhanced participation. The SMART-City-Strategy and the STEP (city development plan) could serve as a framework for community gardening strategies. Neighbourhood management institutions encourage responsibility for and co-creation of public spaces and can thereby include community gardens.

3.2. The view of decision makers and experts from the administration

Participants of round tables and focus group see the potential of community gardens as cool places as well as tools to raise awareness for ecological interconnectedness, enable people to get active and include a wider public into the endeavours to reach climate goals.

Accessibility and outreach of community gardens are seen as barriers. *"I do not know how many people are gardening there. But if we are talking about climate change adaptation and green and cooling and the others can not enter those spaces, then this is a problem. So it is important to find a solution to this."* (participant Round Table Vienna). In some cities access for the public is part of the funding requirements or even precondition for getting the land. But even gardens that are open are not always perceived as such. *"When I pass by there I do not feel invited"* (participant Round Table online).

Screening the support structures and funding schemes for community gardens it can be stated that many regional or municipal governments do support the establishment and operation of community gardens either with money, material resources or training and counselling. Some like the City of Graz, Natur im Garten in lower Austria or Servicestelle Gemeinschaftsgärten in Tyrol have stated a clear vision why they are supporting community gardens, others are less clear about the purpose. In general a strategy defining the different steps on how to roll out community gardening could not be found so far.

3.3. Development of strategies and good practices

Though not a real strategy, the Bildungskatalog für Gemeinschaftsgärten (education catalogue for community gardens) can be described as good practice for enhancing the environmental education aspect of community gardens (see description above)

To develop strategies for community gardens and to bring community gardens into existing strategies related to climate change adaptation and environmental education the right entry points/contacts to the right persons are crucial. Sustainability coordinators of the regions might be good contacts. People responsible for the different strategies were difficult to reach for us for the round tables but are still

important. The KEM and KLAR managers are relevant contact persons to get in touch with responsible persons in different municipalities. Bringing together people from different areas such as education, climate change, spatial planning, civic participation will be necessary to create a conclusive strategy that includes all potentials of community gardens in the context of climate change.

In Vienna on a city level it is seen as difficult to create a strategy for further developing community gardens. There are too many different sections in the city administration that have to be involved. These do not feel in power to initiate a process for developing such a strategy. The major or someone at the top of administration would have to initiate the process. At the same time it is recommended to talk to representatives of all different sections and see how they can support community gardens.

It might be helpful to create a policy paper, describing the problem and possible solutions and discuss it with the representatives. In smaller cities with less complex administrative bodies it seems easier to bring relevant decision makers together. For example the city of Graz has, already 14 years ago, invited people who are active in community gardens to join regular meetings and has developed a funding scheme that fits the needs of the local garden communities.

3.4. Strategy implementation and effectiveness

Concerning strategy implementation and effectiveness we have found little evidence. Further research to evaluate implementation and analyse the impact of strategies, funding and support on national and regional level are required.

What we can derive from other strategies like the food strategy Vienna and also from the example of Graz close contact between activists/active people in the field seem crucial to create strategies that have a positive impact on both the development of gardens and the benefit for the society as a whole. Paid staff in networking and service organisations that works in close cooperation with the gardens helps to bring community gardens forward and unfold their potentials. *“P. [the person in charge of community garden service] does a good job. But she has only few [paid] hours and if she had more hours she could do much more”* (participant Focus Group).

Probably it is too early to draw a conclusion in this point as only few institutions have formulated explicit strategies and the joint thinking and development of climate strategies and community garden strategies is only in a very early stage.

4. Conclusion

Community gardens in Austria have quickly developed during the past 15 years. Numbers have risen and the ways community gardens are developed and managed have differentiated. The picture of community gardens is widely positive though there is also some critique.

New and more cooperations to raise the number of community gardens are seen as an opportunity. Enterprises, land owners, parishes and building companies are possible partners.

Networking among the community gardens is an important topic and should be forced even more. The CGs can benefit greatly and learn a lot from each other both in the horticultural and in the social and organisational context.

There is a great approval from gardeners, gardening organisations and administrative and political representatives that community gardens are - and can be even more in future - places of environmental education. Still there are some constraints. Among community gardeners there is a lack of time to organise formal education activities or to invest more time in exchange among gardens. Funded professional support could improve the situation. To reach people outside the gardens has proven to be difficult and could be solved through more diverse cooperations either with educational organisations or other initiatives in related fields.

Another challenge, concerning education as well as their function as green infrastructure is the lack of openness of community gardens. This might be due to gardeners who do not want to open the garden to the public, due to a lack of communication - so even gardens that are open are not perceived as such - or due to missing regulations. Clear frameworks as part of land leasing contracts on public land, funding schemes (like in Graz) or general policies (like in Paris) can help make

community gardens cool places for everyone and widen the target groups for environmental education in and through the gardens.

Moreover there are several climate relevant strategies that could include community gardens. In few like the climate road map they are even mentioned. Yet a strategic development of community gardens in general as well as to tackle the challenges of climate change has not yet come into practice. Getting in touch with decision makers on all levels to raise awareness of the potential of community gardens seems a first step to work in this direction. Concerning the impact of existing strategies and the implementation and effectiveness of future ones further research has to be done.

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6. Annex

6.1. Methodology

ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Period of data collection	08/04/22 - 09/05/22
Number of gardens, that have participated	30
Number of gardeners represented (total)	1430
Ways of reaching respondents	e- mail to all garden addresses registered on Gartenpolylog garden map and Bodenbündnis
Response quote (to how many did you send out, how many did you get back)	30 of 376

FOCUS GROUP

Date	05/05/2022
Number of participants	6
Field of expertise of the participants	participants came from community garden networking and service organisations, from (environmental) education and from organisations dealing with regional climate change adaptation and mitigation
Relation between participants	participants from similar fields already knew each other, but did not know each other across disciplines
Online or place	online via zoom
How did you choose participants?	We were looking for participants from the three fields education, climate change strategies and community gardens and contacted experts from our network

How easy or difficult was it to get them?	Most of the people we contacted were interested but not all the people we contacted were available at the date
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ROUND TABLE 1 focus Vienna

Date	27/06/22
Number of participants	4
Background of participants (politicians, administrative body, national/regional/local,...)	2 people came from the city administration of Vienna, 2 from service organisations for citizens dealing with urban gardening
Relation between participants	as all were related to the city of Vienna, they mostly knew each other
Online or place	Wiener Planungswerkstatt, in the city centre of Vienna
How did you choose participants?	We invited political representatives and persons from the city administration from the fields of education, climate change adaptation and mitigation and contact organisations for citizens.
How easy or difficult was it to get them?	Unfortunately political representatives did not have time or capacity to come and have sent substitutes from the administration. In addition 2 people, who had agreed to come, were ill and could not participate.

ROUND TABLE 2 Austria

Date	29/06/22
Number of participants	2
Background of participants (politicians, administrative body, national/regional/local,...)	One person was from the city administration of Graz, one person from the Forum Umweltbildung, an institution founded by the ministry of education and the ministry of environment and climate,

	working for environmental education.
Relation between participants	They did not know each other and do not have any relation to each other.
Online or place	online
How did you choose participants?	The aim was to invite people working in the fields of climate, community gardens and education on national, regional and local level. To get a better picture of different regional situations we invited representatives from all over Austria.
How easy or difficult was it to get them?	Unfortunately many people we invited were not available. In addition 5 of the 7 persons who had agreed to come, could not participate as they got ill or did not come without excuse.

In addition to questionnaire, focus group and the two round tables data collection was completed through online- research and consultation of national, regional and local climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies and city development strategies.