

Community gardening in Kyoto

A collective experience of interacting with nature, growing food and protecting the environment

Severin HATT, with Kayo MARUNO and the whole group of Agenda gardeners*

Urban is often opposed to countryside. Nonetheless, community gardens in cities have been resisting to land artificialization. For urban citizens, such pieces of nature within cities offer a unique place to meet and farm. In Kyoto, a group of gardeners, members of the association Agenda, has been cultivating a piece of land collectively for some years already.

The garden is at the foot of Mt Hiei and neighbours the Shugakuin Rikyu Imperial Villa, in Kyoto. Classified as a scenic area, the land is relatively protected from urban expansion. Overhung by the forest of Kyoto's Northern Higashiyama mountains, it is a piece of nature which offers the gardeners the precious opportunity to enjoy nature and escape the city's bustling atmosphere. "I am happy just because there are many greens" says Etsuko Fujii-san, who initiated the project within Agenda. "Especially when I started farming, I was surprised that there is such a green place in the city of Kyoto!" The natural environment of the garden is among the main reason why the gardeners like to come cultivating this land. "I like being outside in the fresh air, and the location of the garden, near the mountains, is very peaceful and calming" tells Kayo-san. For Severin as well, "the place where the garden is located is very beautiful. Coming to the garden is about spending a moment in a bubble of nature, although the nature of a farmed garden is transformed, but still. There are the forested mountains around, giving the impression of being far from the city."

From ones' own balcony to a community garden

In 2011, just after the Fukushima nuclear accident, Fujii-san got the opportunity to start cultivating this garden. It had been some years already that she liked growing plants on her balcony. "I had always thought that Japan's very low food self-sufficiency was a problem, and many Japanese people, including myself, didn't know how to grow crops [...] I thought, 'It would be good if everyone starts growing vegetables little by little.' [...] However, the veranda was small, and we couldn't grow much in the planters." It was during a campaign against the constitutional change that Fujii-san met another activist who invited her to join the garden. "I was very excited and immediately agreed to join!" she recalls.



It's fun to garden as a group

The cultivation of the land is shared by about 10 groups of gardeners. Agenda gardeners are one of them. “The landowner agreed to let it be used as home garden, if the gardeners bear the property tax” explains Fujii-san. The land is split into a set of plots that are distributed between the different groups that pay a fee depending on the size of their land. Each group organises autonomously but facilities and tools are shared and organic fertilizers such as compost are purchased together. Organic materials such as plant residues are also composted at the garden. Compared to other types of urban vegetable gardens like the German *Schrebergarten* (1), the plots here are not fenced up and the gardeners from the different groups enjoy talking, sharing tips and parts of their harvests. “I like the people in the garden, and I am always happy to meet them there” says Victoria-san. Mai Matsuda-san also explains: “it is important for me to work with various people. I can't do it alone.” There is no doubt that meeting people and growing food together is one of the important features of the garden.

Taking care of plants and interacting with nature

Gardening together is essential to share knowledge and learn from each other. Indeed, experiences at growing vegetables vary within the group: for some, it was the first time to cultivate the land. “I had never done any gardening before, so I had to learn everything from scratch. How to make ridges, how to apply fertilizer when planting, how to apply mulch covers,

and so on” recalls Fujii-san who now has a ten-year experience at gardening. For Victoria-san, “it is very interesting how much technology and past human knowledge there is in non-pesticide gardening, and I always enjoy learning about it.” Indeed, growing vegetables without using pesticides is challenging and highly knowledge-intensive (2). “Depending on the season, insect damage on cruciferous vegetables, such as komatsuna, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, and mizuna can be extremely big” warns Fujii-san. Biodiversity-based techniques are developed, tested and improved by the gardeners to reduce the abundance of pests and the resulting damages on plants. Fujii-san continuing: “[reducing pest attacks] was quite successful when the cruciferous crops were surrounded by red perilla. However, a few times when it was not enclosed, it did not work well, so I think that trial and error will be necessary in the future. Also, if there is too much perilla, they will be removing nutrients, so I think that we need to pursue just the right planting method.” Increasing soil fertility is also a key aspect of ecological agriculture. Some techniques observed in natural farming are tested in the garden. “It seems that it is good to layer the soil and weeds like millefeuille in order to properly turn the weeds into fertilizer. Alternatively, it seems good to mix fermented foods such as pickles. I hope we can do that in the future” says Fujii-san.



Gardening in an ecological way is essential in making the garden a safe place and the land rich in biodiversity. In return, the gardeners enjoy even more coming and cultivating the land. “I enjoy the contact with soil and to see the local insects,” says Kamala-san. Severin also pays much attention at “looking at how nature behaves: how do plants grow well or not; what are the insects around, why they are here; and trying to make that plants grow in the best way with the available

natural resources: compost, mulching, mixing plants together..." From seeding to harvesting, the various steps are enjoyed as a whole process of growing its own food. Kayo-san explains: "it feels good to use ones' own hands to work with the soil and plants and it is very rewarding to see the fruits of our own work and to harvest naturally grown veggies." While harvesting appears to be a highlight, all the steps are important. "I like harvesting, of course, but I also like to pull out the grass, prepare the soil, plant seedlings and sow seeds" tells Taka Tanino-san. Aileen Mioko Smith-san also likes "all of it: weed, water, harvest. I guess weeding and harvesting best. And learning about growing the food - about each vegetable, what was done, what is next step." It is interesting to note that, while hand weeding is often seen as a burden in ecological farming, the gardeners here like it as one among other tasks. Taking care of the plants, and more generally having a physical contact with nature is a key output of gardening. "In my daily life, there are not many opportunities to care for plants and interact with nature, so it can be a refreshing feeling" summarizes Matsuda-san.



Such an experience of nature is revealed in the way the gardeners appreciate the different seasons; and spring is the favourite one for most of them. "Suddenly coming from the cold winter, there is a boom of nature; everywhere it turns to green, and insects are suddenly everywhere. What an explosion of life!" tells Severin. For Matsuda-san also, "you can feel the breath of life." "From the brown landscape of winter, it becomes a green world at once" says Fujii-san. Spring is also as the start of a new farming year. "All is new to be planned and planted, seedlings at home, the curiosity how the plants will be able to grow" explains Kamala-san. For Andrey-san also: "I do love spring, when there aren't many vegetables yet, but when the beginning work is being done. I really enjoy putting the seeds into the earth and observing over several weeks how they grow out of the earth and develop into plants," he says. Nonetheless, autumn is also one of the favourite

seasons because the temperature is stable and there is much to harvest. However, for Victoria-san, winter is the best season: “I am often indoors in winter, and having to go to the garden pushes me to leave the house and stay outside for a few hours. It makes me realize every time how nice it is to be outside. Being close to the plants also improves my grumpy winter mood.”

Multi-cultural and generational exchanges in practice

Over time, the number of Agenda participants increased and today, the group is made of about 10 gardeners who come regularly. “When the number of participants was small, it seemed to be difficult, so I participated with the intention of helping” recalls Matsuda-san. Fujii-san, who was the first to start gardening, gradually invited Agenda members to join and made gardening one of Agenda’s projects. The topic of food and agriculture had been already discussed for some times within Agenda. “Due to the historic industrial priority policy, agriculture is treated coldly, and the average age of farmers is over 65 years old. At the same time that agricultural production is declining more and more, large-scale acquisition of farmland increases mass spraying of dangerous pesticides and genetically modified agricultural products. The decay of farmland will increase the climate crisis and associated disasters” explains Fujii-san about the situation in Japan. As a result, she says, “Japan’s food self-sufficiency rate is very low, and it depends on imports. The food self-sufficiency rate is about 37% overall, and it is less than 30% for cereals. [...] If something happens, there is a danger that food in Japan will be in short supply, and it is also difficult to eliminate genetically modified foods.” Making gardening one of Agenda’s projects was a practical response to the worrisome situation of Japan’s agriculture and food system.

In the past few years, the group became very international. Today, six nationalities are represented: Japanese, German, Lebanese, Russian, American and French. (At the time of publishing, new members from Madagascar and Canada have also joined the group.) Many different languages can be heard at the garden. “I was able to experience the culture and way of thinking of various countries and regions through the fields” says Fujii-san. For the non-Japanese, being part of the gardeners participates in being integrated in local society. “I feel more connected to Japanese society in that way that Agenda is an established and honourable organization and has welcomed us with open arms” explains Kamala-san. Furthermore, the group is multi-generational. Grandmother comes with grandson, and the youngest gardeners just turned one this summer. “Now that we have a child, I also want to show him how vegetables and other plants grow and I want him to feel the soil, the plants and observe insects” says Kayo-san. It appears that cultivating the land within such a group offers the gardeners much more than harvests. Especially, the positive feeling of building something good with other people is one of the important motivations. “I feel that I contribute to a good thing” says Kamala-san. Victoria-san also explains:

“I feel that I am part of a community that is creating something nice, and that I want to contribute. I think it was the first time for me to grow something with other people. This experience is very precious for me, it gives me an insight into a better world where people manage themselves, collaborate, and make nice things happen.”



Strengthening environmental activism

This positive feeling nurtures the political activism of some members. For example, Fujii-san who is very much involved in campaigns to stop nuclear power plants in Japan explains: “if an accident occurs at a nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture, Kyoto city will be contaminated with radioactivity [...]. It would be catastrophic if the soil in the field is contaminated with radioactivity! [...] Of course, I am afraid about the fact that not only the fields but also the entire city of Kyoto will be contaminated, but I have the feeling that I want to stop nuclear power plants also in order not to contaminate the fields.” Another issue is urbanization. Urbanization and the reduction of urban and peri-urban agricultural land happen in Japan like in the rest of world (3). Although Kyoto’s urban development has been slow compared to other large metropolis like Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya, land in Kyoto continues to be artificialized to build individual houses. A field neighbouring the garden was grabbed this year. “I am worried about new houses being built around our garden. I sincerely hope that our garden will not be turned into land for housing projects” says Kayo-san. “I am determined to maintain it” says Fujii-san about the garden, noting that there are few places like this in Kyoto. “It would also be nice to get in touch with other community gardens in Kyoto city, people that do gardening like us outside of their own private land, to share experiences and to raise our voice against land being sold for housing projects”

suggests Kayo-san. Other global threats such as climate change and biodiversity decline, with detrimental effects on agricultural production already being felt, also strengthen the willingness of the gardeners to protect natural and cultivated land. Nonetheless, hazards may come from inside the garden and from the gardeners' practices themselves. People "should stop using plastic foil to cover their soil, because there is a lot of plastic waste lying around and this is bad for everyone" complains Kayo-san. Indeed, the widespread use of plastic in our daily life has made microplastic pollution pervasive (4). Plastic mulching in agriculture is used to avoid weeds to grow, to avoid water evaporation and to warm up the soil. Nonetheless, it is a major source of soil pollution. A recent study carried out in China indeed revealed the very strong relation between the use of plastic foil in agriculture and the amount of plastics in soils (5). "Viable alternatives would need to be found, other materials or techniques, and presented. To talk about these issues, we would need a meeting maybe every half a year or so" proposes Kayo-san.

It appears that cultivating a small piece of land as part of a community provides a bunch of positive experiences, ranging from interacting with nature to acting for a better society. "I am learning so much more about what I consume, how it grows, when it grows, how hard or easy it is to grow, what is in season" says Victoria-san. Manual work in the outside balances the indoor jobs that many have, and seeing the practical results of one's work, when harvesting, is a great reward. "When I go to the fields I sometimes think, 'there is a lot of work to do' or 'it's hot today, so it's going to be hard to water' but once I start working, the unwellness and frustration of doing editing work in front of a computer go away. By the time I go home, I feel very happy even though I am tired. It's very strange" tells Fujii-san. For Andrey-san also: "I like to do garden work away from my usual working place, that is primarily, away from computer and neon lamps. It actually makes me feel very good", he says. Finally, back home, farming and food connect. "I like coming back home from the garden and cooking with whatever vegetables we harvested that day. The constraints on the ingredients make my cooking more creative" says Victoria-san.

In contrast to having its own private garden, these experiences here are shared collectively. The organisation can of course be improved, within the group, and with the other groups of gardeners. However, every gardener feels responsible for taking care of the garden and try their best. While generally those coming share the harvest, they also often stop by one who was absent on the way home to further share some of the vegetables. This sense of the community is key in making the garden an inclusive place where everyone feels good. This collective action is a platform for increasing the shared awareness on environmental issues and a practical experience to develop solutions for living in an ecological way.

** The gardeners' opinions and experiences at the garden were collected through an online survey in August 2020. Severin Hatt thanks them very much for their participation. As one of the gardeners himself, he also answered the survey.*

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