

Intercultural Dialogue | 15.09.2006

## Spades and Trowels Help Immigrants Feel At Home



*A multi-lingual welcome at the Intercultural Garden in Berlin-Köpenick*

**"Intercultural gardens" are cropping up all over Germany. They enable immigrants to rent land to grow flowers and vegetables in their new country, while learning the language and making friends at the same time.**

The gift of a green thumb may not only translate into thriving plants. The talent may also help the gardener to take root in a new country.

Intercultural gardens allow immigrants to rent plots of land and plant gardens. They can work side-by-side with Germans -- pursuing their gardening hobby, carving out a niche for themselves in a foreign country and improving their German. Many of the foreign gardeners cultivate plants and herbs from their home countries, which they otherwise can't find in Germany.

"It's a way of integrating people from other countries here while having fun at the same time," said Daniela Arthen, an intercultural gardener in Cologne. She heard about the gardens while she working for the German branch of the United Nations Refugee Agency.

### No fences



*"Wide open spaces foster an openness to others"*

Imagine this: an expanse of land about half the size of a football field in a sleepy neighborhood in northern Cologne, right next to the Rhine river. The open field is punctuated by little vegetable patches measuring about 20 x 20 feet. Tufts of lettuce, furry heads of carrots, sassy green tobacco leaves sprout up from the lush, brown soil in the patches.

Compost bins line one edge of the field while a bright blue hut decorated with a huge bird stands at another corner and houses all sorts of garden utensils. A water pump rears its head in the field's center.

A group of gardeners, each with their own little plot of land, can decide what they want to cultivate. Some of the garden club members don't even have a plot; they just help out the others with plowing, weeding and watering.

The classic mini-gardens rented by individuals in Germany -- known as *Schrebergärten* -- are renowned for being tiny plots of land, made even smaller by fences closing them in like fortresses, each gardener relatively cut off from his or her neighbor.

But in this huge garden, each plot is open to the other, separated only by a strip of grass. There is just a chain-link fence that surrounds the entire field to keep out rabbits and dogs.

## "Freedom"

The idea behind intercultural gardens is not separation, but integration.



*Many nationalities among gardeners in Cologne*

"What I like about the garden is that the people here are open, warm and friendly," Arthen said.

The intercultural garden club in Cologne was created in 2005 and has about 30 members, eight of them very active. The gardeners are originally from Turkey, Iran, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia, Japan, Poland and Germany. Previous members have been from Iraq and the Ivory Coast.

"Gardening is my hobby because I feel a connection to the earth," said Khosro Sarhang, who is from Iran, but has lived in Cologne for 27 years. "I don't like all of the rules and regulations of a normal *Schrebergarten* association," he said.

"I like the freedom of our garden -- that things aren't so strict."

Besides the agricultural work, what unites the gardeners is that they all speak German with one another. It is good practice for those who are new in the country and are learning the language.

In the evenings or on the weekends, after the garden work is done, club members barbecue and make salad. Sitting down together to share some of the fruits of their labor is better than sitting at home alone watching television, many say.

"Other gardens are boring compared to this," said gardener Helen Batemona, originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo and now residing in Cologne.

## Urban oases



*All alone in a classic "Schrebergarten"*

The intercultural garden idea is based on the "community gardens" found in big cities in the United States. There, old, abandoned areas in urban centers are turned into gardens where all sorts of people can work the land. Not only can people with little money grow their own vegetables, the oases of green in the urban context provide a restful respite for frazzled city-dwellers and eye candy for weary passersby.

In Cologne, the intercultural gardeners pay an annual 50 euro (\$63) membership fee. Rent of 500 euros is paid from those fees each year to the city to use the land; the rest of the money goes toward water costs, gardening tools and the hut. Gardeners pay for their own plants and seeds.

"I have always worked in human rights, peace and international projects, but at some point, they just all become huge and unwieldy," said Ingrid Holzmayer, one of the initiators of the garden project last year in Cologne. "At some point, I decided I wanted to do something that has a direct impact on my surroundings and my city," she said.

She said that when she heard about the intercultural gardens, she liked the idea that cultivating cucumbers, tomatoes and zucchini could serve a greater purpose by making foreign nationals feel at home in Germany.

For Cologne, with an immigrant population of around 20 percent, that is no minor matter.

## European-wide phenomenon



*Asian women work the land in Berlin*

Cologne was late in getting its multicultural garden. A group of Bosnian women at a refugee center in Göttingen established the first intercultural garden in Germany in 1995. A social worker had asked them what they missed most about their homeland. They all said, "our gardens."

The idea has taken off since then, with nearly 100 intercultural gardens in cities across Germany.

It's also a European phenomenon, with hundreds of such gardens in Austria, France, Holland and Great Britain, among others.

Participating gardeners often visit each other in different countries to exchange ideas.

The project has caught on so well, a foundation called *Stiftung Interkultur* was created in 2003 to coordinate the network of intercultural gardeners in Germany. The garden projects have also won numerous prizes; the Göttingen garden received an award in 2002 as a model of integration in Germany from former German President Johannes Rau.

The gardens work toward integration on a European level as well. Christa Müller, managing director of Munich-based *Stiftung Interkultur*, spoke at a Swedish university last year on "Intercultural Gardens -- A New Approach to Changing the European Conception of Integration."



*Kids help out in the garden -- and taste the fruits of their labor*

Furthermore, *Stiftung Interkultur* coordinates on an international basis, with groups like the Black Environment Network and the Women's Environmental Network in Great Britain, the Community Gardens movement in the US, and the Council on the Environment of New York York City.

## **Unfriendly acts**

In Cologne, some of the hobby agriculturalists fear they have angered local residents because their garden has taken away space where locals walked their dogs.

They are also not certain whether they are welcome for other reasons.

Before visitors enter Cologne's intercultural garden, they'll notice a little sign from the police posted near the gate. It asks people passing by to please not harm the fence or the gate, as they have already been destroyed three times.

At one time, a large wooden sign was hung outside the garden with the words "intercultural garden" on it. It was defaced and destroyed so many times, the gardeners ended up taking it down. Bikes have also been stolen from inside the open gate. The gate now has to be locked even when the gardeners are there.

"We don't know if it was just youth wanting to vandalize, or if the damage was done by people who don't like the fact that we are here," said Arthen.

## **Garden under guard**



"The bird keeps watch over the garden"

The intercultural garden in the Lichtenberg district of Berlin has also had problems. It was just started in August this year, but *Stiftung Interkultur* said police must guard it because the far-right NPD party in Germany has protested it.

Still, the multicultural gardeners are not deterred. They keep coming back to cultivate and track the progress of their crops. And to enjoy each other's company.

In Cologne, Beatrix Langehenke takes a relaxed approach. "I don't have this huge ambition of trying to save the world or a certain group in society. That kind of happens on its own anyway," she said. "When people make friends, they automatically establish roots somewhere."

Louisa Schaefer

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- DW-WORLD: **Germany Champions Sustainability At Architecture Show**

Sixteen major cities from around the globe are represented at the 10th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, dedicated to city dwellers and their landscapes. One of them is Berlin. (Sept. 12, 2006)

- Externer Link: **Intercultural gardens network site**

In German and English

- Externer Link: **Black Environment Network site**

- Externer Link: **Women's Environmental Network**

- Externer Link: **Community Garden.org -- a US site**

- Externer Link: **Council on the Environment of New York City**

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