



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following questions have been raised by urban gardeners participating to the HORTIS activities (courses, workshops, practical labs) in the different partner cities and in the HORTIS reference gardens.

HORTIS partners, with the aim to ease and promote the creation of community and urban gardens have provided different forms of support to urban gardeners and volunteers, either in presence (e.g. through regular face to face meetings) and at distance (being available for questions / answers via email and phone).

The following list includes the most relevant and frequent questions posed by gardeners from the different cities and countries and summarizes the answers given by partners on the basis of the common and transversal approach to urban horticulture developed within the HORTIS project.

General knowledge about urban gardening:

1 - How to find a place, a field, a plot for community gardening ?

In order to discover the right space for gardening, it is convenient to look for spaces that attract you in your neighbourhood. Ask people if they know about something, walk around and look on your own or ask in the local urban planning department. Having spotted one or more plots, the ownership of each should be found out. In the next step try to contact the owners and negotiate with them about your aim to garden there.

2- Who likes community gardening? How can people meet and create a community?

You can announce your idea in your neighbourhood by using bulletin boards in supermarkets or public buildings such as libraries, municipalities or district offices. There is also quite a big variety of websites or internet portals offering the possibility to communicate your ideas or simply talk to people from other gardens around knowing about new gardens to be set up.

3 - How much does community gardening cost?

In order to understand the costs of urban gardening there are different aspects to be considered. Do you have to pay a rent, lease or compensation for the land? Is additional soil needed? Is construction-material needed to build elevated beds or sheds? Are garden tools available or should be bought? What about the seeds, seedlings and plants? Are they already there, are there donations e.g. from other gardens or do you have to buy everything? Then have a look also in online-selling-portals... What about watering the plants? Can you collect rain water or do you need to buy water from the municipal water supply? Do you need an insurance for your organisation's activities? Check out all the given requests and find out the best answers and solutions for your activities.

4- It is legal to garden in the city?

There is nothing forbidding gardening in the city. Certainly, you have to respect local rules, given guidelines or requirements being derived from the available land conditions (e.g. soil quality or accessibility). The local municipalities can provide information about what and how things need to

be respected in the public areas.

5 - Do I need to know anything or what do I need to know if I'd like to participate?

First of all, you need the willingness to learn new things, to be open for new information and for different points of views by other people. Besides that there are many good books and websites addressing urban gardening and social processes in community gardens. By surfing the www.hortis-europe.net website a number of manuals, technical cards and multimedia material can be found. Furthermore, lots of practical workshops are periodically held in community gardens about all kind of relevant topics and you can simply ask your garden neighbour about some tips and tricks. Be patient and offer enough time to learn step by step, thus you'll get to know whatever you like to learn about.

6- What if not all of the gardeners understand each other (because they speak different languages, have different backgrounds, different understandings, ...)?

People in urban gardens often have pretty different backgrounds and therefore have different forms of communication. Not everybody is able to read or write or people may use different languages. Consistently, often it is very helpful to work with icons and symbols, with simple gestures or just show practically how to do something.

7- My association is starting a community garden project in the neighbourhood with the authorization and support of the city council. However, the neighbourhoods are not interested, they don't come to our initiatives and meetings, even if we invite them and spread information on the project and on the great opportunity we have to make the area greener and to grow our own food. Some people are even strongly against the garden, they think it makes the area look "poor", and that tomatoes attract rats and thus illnesses. Do you have any suggestion on how to involve people that seem to be uninterested and to make those who are adverse at least tolerant?

Very often it is helpful to give international comparisons and references, especially with regions in the world that are admired by people. Often, it is helpful to invite relevant experts to talk about gardening, the benefits of it and the healthy output they will have on the neighbouring area. Nowadays, urban gardening is also fancy and en vogue, therein there is room for diffusion in cities.

8- Is it only gardening allowed in community gardens ? Or is it also possible to have also other activities in there?

It always depends on the space you are, which kind of regulation is given for it... Usually it is allowed to have picnics, to cook together, to organize games or sport activities. Just check out if, for example, open fire is allowed or if the neighbours are already stressed out about noise in the neighbourhood. Just get an idea about where the allotments are located, what are the formal and informal regulations your garden group needs to respect.

9- What will be done in winter time?

Depending on the regions and on the hardiness of the winter, gardening assumes a different character in coldest months. Nevertheless, winter is an important season for community gardening! The quietness of long dark evenings could be used for talking with the group, their aims and ideas, how to organize everything all together, and so on. You can look back to the last season and make sure that out of that there are no conflicts or questions left. Additionally, in wintertime you probably have more time to have a look to find funding and other support for your garden or for networking with other gardens and initiatives.

Gardens specific knowledge:

1- Are the products of my urban allotment healthy? How can I be sure of that?

It depends basically on the soil which is being used. To be sure about the quality, the best way is to use commercial soil or to take soil samples. Another urban risk is air pollution. Be aware about the level of it around your garden, the same goes for the rain, get an idea about how acid it maybe is in your region and eventually cover the plants with a roof made of glass or plastic film. A good way to find out is the cooperation with students who can test conditions in the laboratory.

2- I would like to grow organic and old variety crops. How can I find seeds and nursery plants?

There are quite a lot of specialized associations and initiatives in every country. You can find the contacts on the internet or talking to other gardeners.

3- What are the best methods to control Aphids and Slugs? And more general pests?

The best is to provide the natural ecological balance as to avoid imbalances in the ecosystem. Once you have pests in your garden you should try to control them by re-establishing the balance in the ecosystem.

4- What kind of plant protection products can we use in an organic garden? When and how should we apply these products?

In an organic garden you can only apply the products listed officially on the webpage of the controlling organization (in Hungary: Biokontroll Hungária Nonprofit Kft, in Italy AIAB, internationally IFOAM) which your garden is certified by. In the case of the urban gardens, usually not official certification is generally adopted, but there always are rules to follow set up by the gardeners. Most frequently, rules allow the use of all the products allowed in certified organic cultivation, with no withdrawal period (expressed as the time interval that shall pass from the last treatment to the harvest in any conventional pesticide). These products with no withdrawal period are of extreme relevance in urban gardens because of the lack of separation of the plots. Homemade plant preparations are allowed, too. From nettle (*Urtica dioica*) after 1 day of soaking in water you can make own "pesticide" against leaf louse or from horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*).

In an organic garden, prevention is mostly important. With appropriate hygiene in your garden you can prevent disease spreading. It is also important to choose carefully the species according to the climate and soil and not to stuff too many plants into small spaces.

5- What kind of weeds can we use for mulching?

In the early spring the first 2 grass cuttings are perfect due there are no weed seeds in it yet. If the weeds are already present in your loan especially pay attention not to use those that can spread their seeds. With grass cuttings better to put narrow layers frequently rather than covering the soil with all the cuttings at once. Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) is especially good to cover the ground to save the soil moisturized and slightly wet for longer time. Young nettle plants have high nitrogen level, which can be washed out slightly with rain into the ground, turning onto a natural fertilizer.

6- Which species should not be used for mulching?

Try do not put plants with woody stem, since they will remain years on the field and you have to clean them next spring. Be careful with the plants with creeping horizontal stem or runner that takes root at points along its length to form new plants. E.g. Couch grass (*Agropyron repens*) is a

common problem and you can prevent the further work with the plant's carefully drying under the sun.

7- What species are suitable for winter mulching and as green manure?

The answer is white mustard (*Sinapis alba*). It can be used as mulch and green manure, too. You plant it in the end of August or beginning of September and just let it grow. Usually you do not have anything to do with the mustard before spring, it need only cutting if the first severe frost days came too late to make the mustard collapse on the ground. Usually with the first severe frosts the white mustard is slightly destroyed and collapse on the ground just to became the perfect cover for the winter time. In the spring you can turn it into the soil as a green manure. Lacy phacelia (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*) is also a good green manure plant. Do not use in small garden perennial plants for manuring since you will have problems to clear them from the area next year.

8- What can we put into the compost?

On the compost pile, use only row materials: fruits and vegetables and their peelings from the kitchen, green cuttings from the garden and egg shells. It means you can put every leftover from the kitchen which is not cooked stuff, bread, meat and so on as it would attract animals as rats or mice. The grass cuttings should be left to dry on the sun for a while before composting. Try not to put the tropical fruits and their peelings because of their probably high pesticide residual level, which can kill all the good organism in your compost. Your compost do not need any additive to start the process of decomposing. The best way is to rely on the power of nature. You need to "put some air" also as it is necessary for the decomposing organism to live. Use a pitchfork to ease the compost. The bottom of your composting area better to be more loose to let the rain water flow out. Small pieces of branches and woody stems are perfect for this. Shady areas are preferred to set up a compost but in rainy years is better to have a more sunny place to prevent rotting. There are also pretty different approaches to compost and probably everybody needs to decide which philosophy to follow: e.g. effective micro-organism or terra preta or bokashi. And is there enough space to re-stack it from time to time or would it be better to have a fast composting system, as often in public green space it is not very suitable to have big heaps of grouchy masses around? The best way would be to gain an overview of the existing methods and possibilities and the conditions in the garden and then to decide the method that would be most suitable for the given circumstances.

9- What kind of organic mulch should we use?

The most adequate plants for mulching are species which are also able to improve the soil characteristics. Consistently, most used species belong to the Leguminosae family, able to fix nitrogen, or from either Graminaceae or Cruciferae, able to rapidly generate fresh biomass. Moreover, seeds need to belong of species that can resist against drought (above all in the mediterranean regions) and pests and illnesses. Further characteristics which these cultures should have is a root system able to mobilize nutrients from different layers of the profile and to ease the decomposition of the material once incorporated. Cover crops may be grown as single (monoculture cover crops) or in mixtures (mixed cover crops).

On the other hand, care should be taken to avoid using nutrient- or water-demanding species, which may generate competition with the main crops.

Usually use the plants which are easily decomposable. Use only healthy plants for mulching, check infection of different diseases and pests. Sometimes it happens that your mulch mysteriously disappears. Be happy because it means, you have a living soil in your garden stuffed with useful organisations and rain-worms.

10- Is it possible to use recycled water for the irrigation of the garden? How can affect the quality of irrigation water to the plants in my urban garden?

Recycled water are becoming more commonly used for agriculture and can also be used in urban horticulture. The recycled water provides nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus, but

sometimes may contain high levels of salts. It may also contain a high content of certain elements such as boron which can be toxic to plants if the content is high. If we think of using wastewater for irrigation of our urban garden, consider the potential risk of contamination of food and people, and that sometimes the depuration treatment is not complete. Therefore, it is important that we ensure that there are no bacteria or nematodes by microbiological analysis before using the water. In our experience, storage of recycled water in a covered container in the light for a few weeks is sufficient to eliminate this risk, since without light bacteria and nematodes die.

As mentioned above, recycled water may contain high content of salts. Plants have varying degrees of tolerance to salinity and therefore we have to take a special care with sensitive crops. The salts affect negatively the growth of plants, even causing their death if salinity in the medium is high or maintained during a long time. Water salinity can be tested by laboratory analysis or by a conductivity meter. As the result, we will take the decision to mix the recycled water with good water (thus salinity will go down) or if we do not have good water to mix with recycled water, then we have to add additional water (about a fifth more than the needed) in order to wash the salts in the medium. Also important is the type of cultivation medium. If we are growing soilless, organic substrates may support irrigation with saline water better than other substrates.