

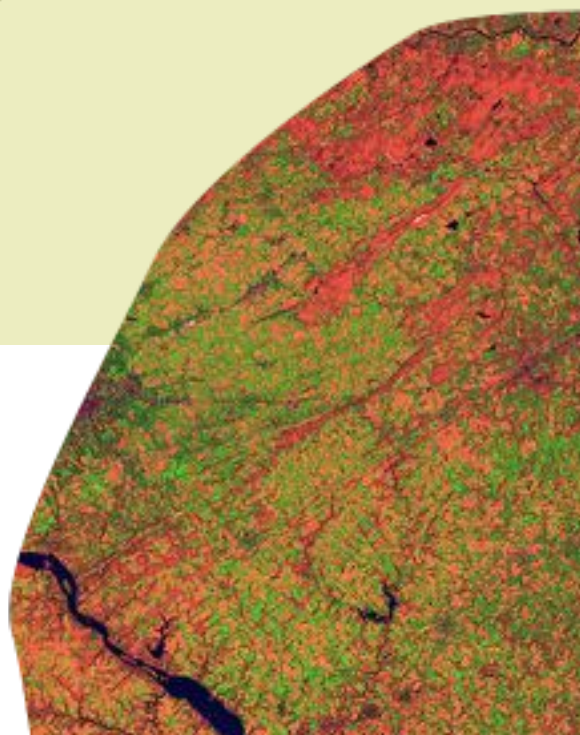
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FORMAS



A Bottom-Up Initiative: Urban Gardens Monte Ciocchi. Volunteer Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi”.

By Giorgia Grossi

In recent years, there has been increasing talk about the necessity of reconnecting with nature, even in heavily urbanized contexts. This desire is undoubtedly linked to a growing focus on a healthy lifestyle and an increasingly inseparable connection with sustainable development. Therefore, the initiative we have decided to reference in this paper concerns the emergence of urban gardens, with a specific analysis of the Volunteer Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi”¹.

Before delving into the activities of this association, it seems appropriate to provide a definition of an *urban garden* to better understand the topic. An *urban garden* is defined as «a green space owned by the municipality and of variable size, managed for a defined period by individual citizens, often organized into specific associations»².

Contrary to what one might think, this type of initiative is rather dated: already during the industrial era, cultivated gardens could be found in urban areas (although with the increase in population and the expansion of cities, this balance was disrupted, and such initiatives became increasingly rare). Specifically, the first urban gardens emerged around the mid-1800s in Germany, while the earliest examples of urban gardens in Italy date back to the years of World War II, thanks to the “War Vegetable Gardens” campaign. However, once this challenging period passed, there was little mention of this type of initiative, at least until our present day.³

The association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi” is a volunteer organization according to the third sector code and is currently an ODV, which stands for Voluntary Organization. The internal statute's mission is focused on environmental protection and socialization. This is why they define themselves as *community* urban gardens: this definition encompasses the idea of creating and enhancing an abandoned place owned by the municipality, making it productive both in terms of food and social interaction.

¹ <https://orti-urbani-monte-ciocchi.business.site/> , this document was consulted on 08.01.2024.

² <https://www.biorfarm.com/orti-urbani/> , this document was consulted on 08.01.2024.

³ Ibid.



Figure SEQ Figura * ARABIC 1: Photo taken by Giorgia Grossi, sign at the entrance to the urban garden

To conduct this research, we reached out to specific individuals who granted us an interview:

- President of the Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi”, Mr. Flavio Della Porta;
- Vice President of the Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi”;
- President of EU Projects Manager & Trainer, spokesperson for “Orti In Comune” and representative of the community urban gardens forum in Rome, Mr. Andrea Messori.

Where is this initiative implemented? Who are the promoters?

The initiative takes place in North Rome in the Balduina area, precisely in the Trionfale neighborhood; specifically, we are in the Monte Mario nature reserve, under the jurisdiction of Roma Natura (it is, therefore, a park, reserve, and municipal property, as can be seen in **Figure 1**).

The initiative has a rather simple origin: in 2014, some citizens frequented the Monte Ciocchi Park as public users, and through casual encounters and word of mouth, there emerged a desire to take care of a portion of the public park that was fenced and completely abandoned.

As a result, the citizens decided, in 2014, to establish the association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi” (a name derived from the then catalyst Orchidea De Santis, involved in the Monte Ciocchi Protection and Surveillance Committee for the mountain and the park, a neighborhood committee that made the opening of Monte Ciocchi Park possible in 2013).

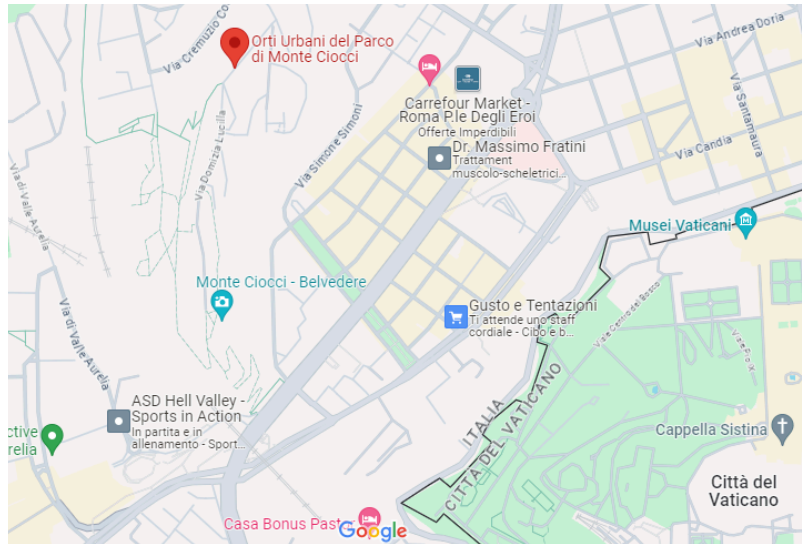


Figure SEQ Figura * ARABIC 2: Screenshot taken from Google Maps, to visually see where this park is located

On February 5, 2014, the Municipality of Rome entrusted the mentioned space to the Association, an initiative that remained partially unauthorized until two years ago (although still within the regulations). Finally, two years ago, the formal authorization for a 6-year + 6-year lease arrived, renewable subject to verification that everything is in compliance with the municipal regulations. Checks are carried out by the Municipality of Rome through the responsible person, Mrs. Paola Marzi, or through the Councilor for Agriculture, Environment, and Waste Cycle of Rome, the current Sabrina Alfonsi⁴). The project approved by the Municipality of Rome aimed at the environmental redevelopment of an area in a state of total abandonment, thanks to the creation of an urban garden. Initially, the garden was something you had to earn, even going against the law. In fact, as Mr. Andrea Messori, the President of EU Projects Manager & Trainer, spokesperson for “Orti In Comune” and the forum for community urban gardens in Rome, tells us, 98% of Rome's urban gardens originated illegally: they are occupations of degraded and often litter-filled spaces that people decide to reclaim. However, when the Municipality officially initiated the Community Urban Gardens project and assessed the green spaces that were actually free from constraints and usable, they realized there were very few. This was because over the years, citizens had autonomously moved and occupied these spaces before the official project began.

Thus, the Municipality of Rome established the Urban Gardens Office, thanks to the goodwill of Mrs. Paola Marzi, who is currently in charge. This was in response to the emerging citizens' desire to take care of green spaces. The Municipality of Rome has two levels to regulate this type of

⁴ <https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/sabrina-alfonsi.page> , this document was consulted on 10.01.2024.

activity: on one hand, the Regulation on Urban Gardens and Shared Gardens (with Resolution No. 38 of July 17, 2015⁵), and on the other hand, the Green Regulation (which regulates everything related to the municipality's greenery, including the management of green areas, concessions, types of plants that can be planted, and extends to urban gardens). These two regulations, dealing with common themes, often intersect. In addition to relying on these regulations, the Volunteer Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocci” has its own internal regulation, drafted and modified through extraordinary meetings of its members, aligning with the aforementioned regulations.

The Volunteer Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Mario” is a self-sustaining association, and therefore, a fee determined by the Board of Directors (chaired by Mr. Flavio della Porta, President of the Association) must be paid. The Board consists of 5 figures:

- President;
- Vice President;
- Treasurer;
- Secretary;
- External Relations Officer.

How was the creation of the Urban Gardens in this area experienced by the neighborhood?

Initially, it was met with ambivalence, as told by the President of the “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocci” Association. However, over the years, the Association evolved, becoming more open to the external community and spreading awareness of the potential of that place through various dedicated initiatives. They also worked on making their activities better known to the community. While residents in the area with a direct view of the park initially saw them almost as *invaders*, over time, they accepted them, realizing that it could only be an added value. This was both in terms of area control and presence, as well as in terms of environmental protection and fire prevention. The President of the Association mentions one of the phrases they often heard from the residents of the area: 'Rather than leaving the park abandoned... better this way.' They realized that having a lived-in and well-maintained park in front of their homes was certainly better than having an abandoned park full of waste.

⁵ <https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/scheda-servizi.page?contentId=INF60787&pagina=2> , this document was consulted on 10.01.2024



Figure 3 & 4: The photo was taken by Giorgia Grossi inside the urban garden of Monte Ciocchi.

Who are the beneficiaries of the initiative?

Typically, the beneficiaries of these initiatives are non-professional cultivators, residents of the neighborhood where the initiative takes place, who are granted the green space for predefined purposes. They usually engage in the production of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, which will then be used to meet the needs of the assignees themselves.

The President of the “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi” Association explains that they specifically have 17 *members* and about twenty *volunteers*:

- *Members* are those who have their own plot assigned by the Association to cultivate. They can plant whatever they want in their garden (excluding broad beans to avoid favism-related issues and also excluding trees to prevent damage to neighboring plots). Their only obligation is to cultivate and continue to maintain the garden well, without using any synthetic products.
- *Volunteers* are individuals who do not have their own plot to cultivate but go to the site to lend a hand with general maintenance. They are not necessarily required to provide a fixed commitment; their assistance can be occasional.

Clearly, being a Volunteer Organization (Organizzazione Di Volontariato or ODV), a fee (deliberated by the assembly) must be paid. With the increase in general costs, management costs have also risen, leading to a payment of €150 for the owners of larger plots (60 sqm) and €100 for

smaller plots (30 sqm). Additionally, insurance is mandatory for both *members* and *volunteers*, covering the membership fee. With the new Internal Regulation, it has been requested that the Municipality allocate a portion of funds to the gardens so that the generated revenue can be used to cover insurance for members, with the remaining amount covering garden costs.

What is strictly prohibited by various regulations (municipal and internal) is the sale of cultivated products. The only opportunity offered to citizens participating in this initiative is, occasionally, to sell a semi-processed product to fund Association activities (an example could be selling small jars of jam or charging an entrance fee for a registered open day event).

Who are the actors involved? What is their background?

The actors involved are the beneficiaries themselves, but do they need to have a specific background? «No», says the President of the Association, continuing to state that «the beauty is precisely that those who come here bring their own experience, knowledge, and desires, creating an exchange with the other actors involved, even at the training level». However, what emerges is the passion that all the actors involved in this initiative have for nature and the environment.

As for the role of the President of the Volunteer Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Mario”, Mr. Flavio della Porta explains that he decided to take a course to become a “*gardeniser*”⁶. This course, lasting 40 hours, is part of a European project of cultural exchange and enhancement of the combination of two terms, “*garden*” and “*organizer*”. This training is defined as a cultural exchange because during these 40 hours, efforts are made to find diversity, challenges, and common ground among the various countries participating in this project. In these 40 hours of training, cultivation aspects are almost marginal; the focus is more on the historical aspects of gardens, organizational-management aspects, budgets, calculations in terms of light and shadow, what to plant and where, etc.

⁶ <https://gardeniser.eu/it/profilo-gardeniser> , this document was consulted on 19.01.2024.

What limits (institutional, physical, social, etc.) does it encounter? Are there visible deficiencies or critical points? What other issues may arise from its implementation?

The President of the Volunteer Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocchi” describes the predominant limit as the scarcity of available land: there are many requests, but there are only about twenty plots, thus satisfying only a small portion of the demands. This criticality leads to a selective narrowing down, delving into the applicant's offered commitment during the interview for an allotment, while also facilitating residents of the area or those closest to it. Clearly, assigning a plot to someone who lives on the other side of the city, in a large city like Rome, becomes a critical point, becoming a discriminating factor in the selection.

One of what we can consider as limits is the presence of some gardens that call themselves *community gardens* but are not at all: these are initiatives promoted by landowners who rent out portions of their land at very high prices (they can reach €500 or €600 per year), allowing cultivation. Practical activities may be the same as true community gardens, but since the owner is a private individual, it becomes a business in every respect. Therefore, it would be more accurate to define them differently because the concept of *community (municipal) gardens* follows a different line, where there is no ownership since the land belongs to the municipality, and it does not have a commercial purpose.

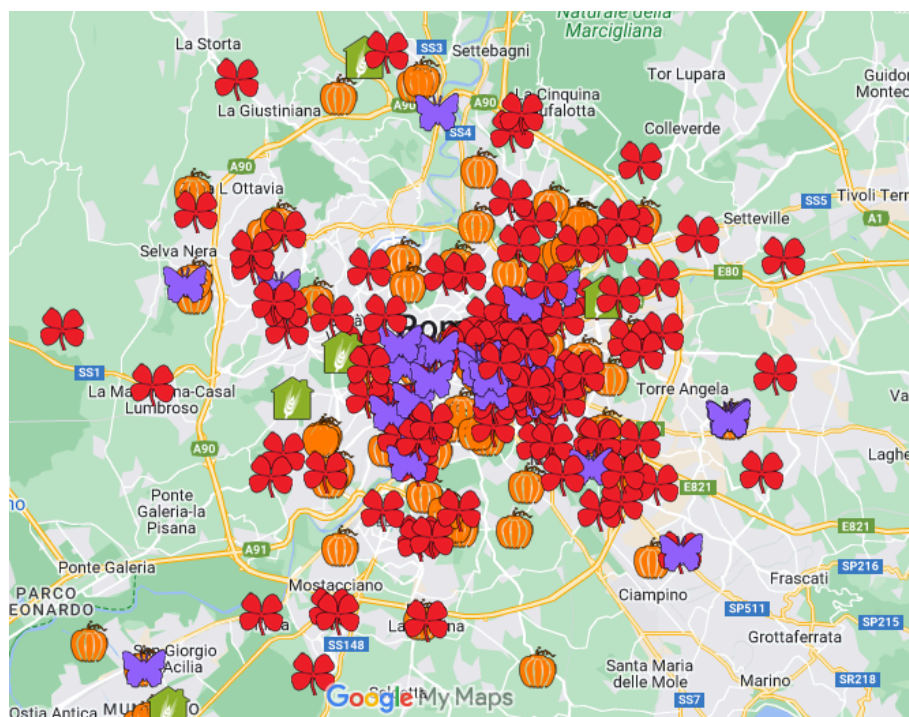


Figure 5: Map of shared gardens in Rome
<https://www.ortidipace.org/mappa-degli-orti-condivisi-di-roma>

As we can see from the map of shared gardens in Rome (**figure 5**), almost all municipal urban gardens are located in the southeast crescent of the city. Why? Because, understandably, the northern part, including the city center and being the financial district, lacks the necessary space to promote such initiatives. The choice, which has already been experimented with in many cities, to create urban gardens on the roofs of buildings has not yet been implemented.

How could it potentially be replicated in other contexts?

This initiative is not unique to Rome; in fact, there are over 160 urban gardens, demonstrating that it is clearly replicable in other contexts. These urban gardens are connected through a network (an association, in turn, an APS - Social Promotion Association), a very democratic and free electronic platform for the exchange of ideas, opinions, problems, etc. It also serves as a sort of trade union, so much so that on this platform, they contributed to drafting the new regulations for urban gardens. The regulations were supposed to be approved by the City Council last December but were postponed and will be approved shortly. There are urban gardens throughout Italy, each managed differently according to their regulations. What distinguishes the urban gardens of Rome is a strong desire to take care of public green spaces and find a place where they can «return to their roots», as stated by the President of the Association, Mr. Flavio della Porta, adding that this is part of their mission.

It is possible to find urban garden initiatives in other countries as well. Two interesting examples were shared by Mr. Andrea Messori, the EU projects manager & trainer:

- In Ireland, a process opposite to ours takes place: land is offered for free, along with seeds, equipment, water, and everything needed, but citizens are not attracted to this type of initiative and prefer to spend their days on other activities.
- In Colombia, on the other hand, the government reclaims territories from Colombian drug trafficking for the creation of urban gardens. The organizers of the Colombian initiative also came to Italy to learn specific techniques, later returning to provide feedback based on their personal experience and offering advice on particular composting techniques.

How does this initiative positively interact with the environment? How about with the climate? Does it address mitigation, adaptation, both, or other dimensions of climate change?

The presence of urban gardens in highly urbanized and anthropized areas leads to the requalification of the territory, moving towards an increasingly *green* concept of the city. Through these initiatives, more people spend time outside, in nature (even within an urban context), thus spending less time at home and using less energy.

«The climate change is felt, and we are the first to notice it», says the President of the Association. He explains how, by participating in urban gardens, people become aware of the different timing compared to industrial production, which is naturally slower here due to the absence of chemicals. This also involves indirect food education. Awareness of what we eat and the certainty of its quality are part of the indirect environmental contributions. Being a mere supermarket user, one fills the cart unconsciously when, in reality, it is important for the environment to respect the seasonality of products. Therefore, it would be better to eat less but in a healthier and more sustainable way. In addition, the gardens contribute to the knowledge and dissemination of products that are no longer on the market and, therefore, many users are unfamiliar with. This helps biodiversity because, by frequenting a garden and consuming its products, even occasionally, people find themselves looking for items that are often not found in supermarkets (often these are products eliminated because they are not attractive and productive enough, hence not meeting the demands of the large market). Consequently, individuals need to visit markets or specific bio producers.

Another aspect not to be underestimated is that initiatives related to urban gardens contribute to withdrawing land from cementation (eliminating problems of water absorption by the soil). Unfortunately, it's not always possible to obtain the concession of those territories with high profit potential. Mr. Flavio della Porta tells us about his attempts to obtain the concession of land adjacent to the garden where a historic Rai (Italian Broadcasting Corporation) antenna stood, which was decommissioned last year. The Association's request and its President's intention to occupy that land aimed to satisfy the numerous requests from those who want to participate in the Urban Gardens initiative. However, they did not manage to obtain the concession, which was instead assigned to a construction company that is proceeding with the creation of new residential buildings.

An initiative present in various community urban gardens, including the one examined in this paper, is the presence of a compost bin (a container designed to collect organic waste). The Association,

like others, operates in terms of material reuse and recycling of urban waste: green waste is directed into the compost bin to produce compost through various techniques, contributing to reducing landfill disposal and often using recycled materials.



Figure 6: Photo was taken by Giorgia Grossi

The Volunteer Association in question also uses water recycling systems: they have a 5,000-liter tank inside a manhole, and through the use of a pump, the wastewater reaches their garden, using non-potable water for irrigation and thus being at zero environmental impact (also thanks to the lack of electricity and energy within the park).

Are there already visible effects?

Mr. Andrea Messori, the EU Projects Manager & Trainer, spokesperson for “Orti In Comune”, and the forum of community urban gardens in Rome, tells us how in England, the insurance market asks those who apply for health and/or life insurance if they are frequent visitors to urban gardens. If they receive a positive response, they will have a lower rate to pay. This is because they have evidently calculated the positive effects, both in terms of staying healthier and in the fight against isolation (less depression, fewer medications, etc.).

A very important project often present in urban gardens is beehives:

«**beehives** s. f. [uncertain origin] A box or other structure prepared by humans for the breeding of bees [...]»⁷

⁷ <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/arnia/>, this document was consulted on 19.01.2024.

In many cases, urban gardens construct beehives using natural and local materials, where bees thrive due to the ample biodiversity present.

In a specific case in Rome, recounted by Mr. Andrea Messori, the Prefecture decided to experiment with air quality using insects, reaching an agreement with some urban gardens that already had beehives. By collecting their honey and conducting analyses, it was found that their honey contained more than 17 essences simultaneously, which was considered a rarity. This is because, in other places, bees do not find a variety of plants on which to land, as is the case in urban gardens.

Researchers decided to create true “ecological corridors for insects”: using the network of urban gardens, they sought those with exposed balconies that connected two gardens so that insects could follow the path and join other bee families, giving biodiversity the opportunity to mix, creating a more long-lived and resilient species.

Mr. Andrea Messori, President of EU projects manager & trainer, spokesperson for Orti In Comune and forum of community urban gardens in Rome, states that with the European project they are submitting, *Gardeniser Community*, a research project involving Roma Tre University with Prof. De Muro, who specializes in social economy, they are addressing the themes we are discussing. They have developed the concept of *Impact Indices of community urban gardens* (based on the model of the Community-Index by Prof. Stefano Zamagni of the University of Bologna): what they want to do is connect data so that they can evaluate the impact as an internal governance tool (i.e., the system tells me where I have reached based on my goals, adding what to focus on this year). However, regarding environmental impact, it is difficult to make statistics on a macro level: «unfortunately, for the climate footprint, it is enough that for 20 days there is more traffic on Via Cristoforo Colombo than the compensatory activity carried out by the garden is canceled»⁸.

A very interesting example, also provided by Mr. Andrea Messori during the interview, concerns the Orti Urbani Garbatella, which originated as an act of disobedience by the citizens of the area. Once the Region's building was constructed, various debris remained, and the Municipality was willing to give away that area for free to someone who would take care of cleaning it up; a private company wanted to build a supermarket there, and when the citizens, eager to have a park, learned about it, they started cleaning the area. One day, they arrived with 10 trucks of soil donated by friends and poured it over the cement, raising the ground by 40 cm (even today, the Orti Urbani

⁸ Interview conducted with Mr. Andrea Messori, President EU Projects Manager & Trainer, Spokesperson for Orti In Comune, and the forum of community urban gardens in Rome.

Garbatella cultivate on a 40 cm layer of soil, which is why the trees are very low, as the roots cannot go deep and are blocked).

Following the creation of this urban garden, they decided to create a mound of soil, raising the ground by about a meter and a half: after various surveys, it was noted that after the construction of this mound, pollution in that area was lower (reducing pollution by 30%).

Does this initiative foster broader changes (legislation, institutional agreements, long-term sustainability, or community preparedness, etc.)? If yes, which ones?

Within an urban garden, there are many environmental issues, states the President of the Association “Orchi Urbani Monte Ciocci”. They may not provide a quantifiable and calculable contribution at the environmental level, but they can certainly offer an important contribution in terms of environmental education through initiatives such as educational gardens, events, etc. The “Orchi Urbani” Association, for example, participates in the “Roma cura Roma” project, an initiative dedicated to cleaning sections of the park. These initiatives have multiple positive aspects, ranging from the goal of combating social exclusion to wanting to do something concrete for climate change. In addition, these are important initiatives for preserving areas from degradation, abandonment, and irregularities while allowing citizens to fully experience and reclaim their territory.

These initiatives also aim to create a connection with our agricultural origins by cultivating typical local products and often ancient products that are no longer even found in the market.

What are the main goals? What are the core values?

The goals, as we have seen, aim at both the redevelopment of abandoned green areas and at socialization, environmental and food education, as well as the dissemination of knowledge. As we have seen throughout this paper and as Andrea Messori states, «the urban garden is not only meant to cultivate things but also to cultivate people».

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