

Cultivating connections: the intercultural language of gardening

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Close your eyes and allow your imagination to wander into a scene of tranquillity. Picture a late summer day, the air still warm and comforting, as the garden beckons with the promise of a generous harvest. It's a time when patience is rewarded, and the soul is infused with a profound sense of gratitude. In this idyllic moment, your gaze falls upon tomato bushes with fruits of different shades of deep red, bright yellow, and even ebony black. This image presents a universal truth that unites people across borders – the beauty and the incredible potential that urban gardening brings to our lives. We could come from the different corners of our beautiful planet, speak different languages, have different political views and cultural aspirations, still a joy from a garden and the gardening process is the thing that has a great potential to serve as a universal language.

In the bustling urban landscape, where city sounds often drown nature's voice, a silent revolution is happening. Gardening, once considered a rural activity, has transformed into an urban force that connects people and promotes unity and belonging.

As someone who has experienced forced migration, I deeply appreciate gardening for its ability to break down barriers. These barriers can be linguistic, especially when you're still hesitant due to limited language skills to connect to locals, or cultural, when you're unsure how to connect with local residents and your social circle remains narrow after arriving in a new place.

I come from a country where cultivation and forging historically used to be rather a necessity. Private gardens saved generations during economic deficit years. I remember my childhood and long summers spent at the vegetable gardens with my grandparents. Gardening was rather a private or let's say family deal. We needed to water and care for the plants every single day because the harvest from these vast gardens was meant to sustain the large family throughout the long winter.

I used to visit my grandpa's place every summer to help him with gardening, but as a child, I didn't find it very enjoyable. It felt more like a duty, something I had to do. So, when I grew up and started my adult

independent life and couldn't spend the whole summer in that distant small village anymore, I felt relieved and didn't return to gardening for a long time.

My first conscious encounter with a garden was in 2020. During the height of the coronavirus crisis, I found myself in a small German university town. Cut off from socialisation opportunities due to COVID-19 restrictions, I applied for a plot at the small community garden that had originally been a tiny flowerbed in front of the house where I lived. I was granted a teeny tiny parcel, about the size of a square metre (something my grandpa would even hesitate to call a garden), and I needed to be selective about what I wanted to grow there. I decided to plant herbs that are typical in Eastern European and Caucasian cuisine but were rather exotic in Germany: dill, estragon, and coriander.

It wasn't a success on the first attempt, but it was a lot of fun to share knowledge with other gardeners and discover some plants that were typical in other parts of the world but would be hardly known in my country. As I delved deeper into my small garden plot, I began to realise that gardening was not just about cultivating plants but also nurturing connections.

In the garden, I met people from diverse backgrounds, each with their unique stories and cultural roots. Our shared love for gardening became a bridge across language barriers and cultural divides. We exchanged tips, swapped seeds, and even prepared meals from the herbs and vegetables we had grown. Through these gatherings, I witnessed the magic of intercultural exchange. We weren't just sharing food; we were sharing our histories and traditions, celebrating our differences, and finding common ground in the universal language of food.

In my own journey, I had come to appreciate the profound impact of gardening, not only as a means of growing herbs but as a means of growing relationships, understanding, and unity. It had taken me from a reluctant gardener in my childhood to a passionate advocate for the transformative power of gardening in building connections and fostering integration in multi-culti societies. And I invite you to start a garden on your balcony, in the backyard of your building or even next to a flower bed! Invite your friends, ask your neighbours to join. And this might be the start of a new good friendship!