

Summary

Between green and grey An exploration of gardens and gardeners in the Netherlands

Neglected gardens

Little research on gardens, yet they are important

Gardens are a topic that have received little research. While it is true that urban agriculture and vegetable gardening are currently 'in' and attention is given to urban green spaces in a general sense, the focus is rarely on individual gardens and gardeners. That is remarkable for several reasons.

First, there is the appearance of the everyday living environment: 70% of Dutch houses have a garden, so they represent a lot of land. A large majority of Dutch citizens appreciate a green living environment, and this is reflected in the higher market value of homes situated in a green setting. Green spaces also reduce stress and promote mental well-being. But what do we ourselves do to sustain that green environment? The current trend is to pave our gardens. Whilst plants in pots do add some green to alleviate the grey of the paving, there is a clear detrimental effect on the environment, and especially as regards global warming. Paving increases the need for cooling and good drainage of rainwater, but actually creates the reverse effect: paving slabs store heat and impede the absorption of rainwater. The result is overflowing drains, in turn leading to contaminated surface water, putting sustainability at risk. It is therefore important to understand what prompts people to choose a green, planted garden or instead to surround their home with grey paving. Gardening is also an interesting theme from the perspective of leisure time use. Roughly half the Dutch population engage in gardening, and for many it is a well-loved and healthy hobby. The time spent on gardening averages out over the year at roughly three-quarters of an hour per week, and much more than this for older persons. Finally, the social aspects of gardening are of interest. High expectations are sometimes set for this in policy circles, especially for community gardens. All these factors prompted scp to engage in a minor catching-up exercise, with a broad exploration of this theme.

The questions addressed in this study are as follows.

- What are Dutch gardens like and which determinants are associated with the choice in favour of a green or a paved garden environment?
- Who are the gardeners who have a garden and which of them engage in gardening frequently, for long periods and with pleasure?
- What influences garden styles and the choices made by garden-owners?
- What are the social aspects of gardening?

We sought answers to these questions by drawing on literature from the Netherlands and elsewhere. We also used a number of databases which contain information on gardening, albeit not as a central topic. These include the regular housing survey by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, an older version of that survey (WoON Module Sociaal-Fysiek 2006) in which street profiles, including front gardens, are described in precise detail, the 2007 edition of the Services and Amenities Utilisation Survey (AVO'07), which contained questions about respondents' gardens, and the Time Use Survey (TBO) from 2011 and earlier years. Finally, a number of interviews were conducted with key persons and small groups of gardeners.

2 Green versus grey

Predictors of green and grey gardens

Most garden-owners have partially planted and partially paved both their front and rear gardens. A number of environmental and personal characteristics are associated with more green or more grey (i.e. paving) in the garden. More paving is associated with suburban residential milieus where gardens are 'usual', with small front or rear gardens and off-street parking, with the remainder of the garden being paved as a result. Young people, people with a lower educational level and women who work at least 30 hours per week are more likely to have paved gardens. Green gardens are a counterpoint to this pattern, being more common among older persons and highly educated people with large gardens in central urban settings, where gardens are unusual, or else in villages where paving is less common.

One important finding is that the likelihood of a green or paved garden increases substantially if opposite neighbours also have that type of garden. Garden construction thus appears to be contagious, an experience shared by several of those interviewed.

Gardening is associated with a healthy lifestyle: participation in sport, but less time staring at a screen

The profile of people who regularly spend a lot of time gardening closely resembles that of people with green gardens, albeit they are not by definition highly educated. They are however again mainly older persons: on average, the over-65s spend more than twice as much time gardening as the average Dutch citizen. Well-educated people also spend more time gardening, but that is because they often have large gardens, which require more work. People with an allotment spend by far the most time gardening; not only have they chosen a time-consuming hobby, but an allotment often provides an extension of their garden at home.

Gardening does not detract from the time spent on sport and other forms of exercise, such as walking and cycling, including by older persons. That is striking: gardening is thus not an alternative form of exercise to be practised when it is no longer possible to take part in sport. Gardeners generally lead a healthy lifestyle, spending lots of time outside; they do

spend time resting in reading, but spend much less time looking at a screen, whether it be television or computer.

Frequent gardeners are no more social than other people, but there are social aspects to gardening

Although frequent gardeners chat to their immediate neighbours more often, because they encounter them more, they are not generally more social than other people; if anything, the reverse is the case, at least when it comes to maintaining social contacts and doing voluntary work. Frequent gardeners do however display a more neighbourhood-oriented activity pattern and less geographical mobility.

This finding does not mean there are no social aspects to gardening. In the interviews we were reminded of the importance for gardeners of receiving plants as gifts; they derive pleasure from them and the different plants remind them of loved ones. In addition, there is a civil society of like-minded people who group together in different ways around their gardening hobby: in associations, gardening clubs, informal groups, garden complexes and community (vegetable) gardens. This shared interest creates both a symbolic and a physical bond and can also bridge social and cultural differences, though it is not a panacea. The visible, non-verbal nature of gardening means that few groups need to feel excluded.

Most green gardeners little influenced by media, commerce and neighbourhood

Commerce, media and examples in the residential setting are sources of inspiration for many gardeners. Garden centres, but increasingly DIY stores as well, are frequently visited for the purchase of garden requisites. These outlets serve a wide public, but the main customers are those who are susceptible to trends and who like to be surprised by something new. That encourages them to choose gardens which create instant impact, with large plants, lots of hard landscaping elements (paving, decking and pots) and garden ornaments.

Most television programmes and lifestyle magazines also tend to push people in this direction. Yet those same retail outlets and media can also inspire other interests or be used to spark off new trends, such as vegetable gardening (e.g. the *AH-moestuintjes* vegetable garden kits from the Albert Heijn supermarket chain, the 'Gardening is cool' campaign by the Intratuin garden centre chain, or campaigns to increase the number of butterflies or reduce the amount of hard landscaping). Such initiatives increasingly come from idealistic organisations, which form broad networks that also include commercial partners.

'Green' gardeners take a very different attitude, because they have more interest in natural processes, which take time. They are interested in plants and are willing to give up some of their own autonomy in order to allow themselves to be surprised by plants – an attitude that demands experience. This sets their gardens apart from the 'instant gardens' of those who garden without patience.

Green fingers and an interest in plants appear to be transferred from parents to children, who often acquire an affinity from their parents for growing and admiring plants. This can surface many years later in a desire for their own garden, though there were also some

interviewees whose children did not acquire their passion for gardening. Conversely, some green gardeners did not receive an example at home, but became motivated later by their interest in nature or by the idea of growing one's own food that has become popular in recent years. There is also an educational aspect here: children learn where food comes from and which natural processes are involved, such as pollination by bees. A broader natural and environmental education is thus a pertinent aspect of green gardening.

Growing one's own plants declining for many years, especially among post-war generations

The style of gardening in which people sow seeds or take cuttings and grow them on has declined rapidly since 1975. This reflects the rise of alternatives, such as a wide array of ready-cultivated plants, which became affordable thanks to the increase in prosperity. There may have been a slight reversal in this trend in 2011 among young people, among whom cultivating plants did not decline further. Sowing and cultivating plants is a gardening method that is still embraced by many older people but which has declined with the generations, especially the post-war cohorts. The proportion of hard landscaping elements in gardens increased steadily between 2002 and 2011; however, since the abolition of the Horticulture Marketing Board (Productschap Tuinbouw), no new measurements have been carried out. Cohort replacement, in which most green gardeners are succeeded by younger, 'greyer' gardeners, does not instil optimism regarding what we may expect from private gardens in the future. On the other hand, it may be that the new enthusiasm for activities such as growing vegetables will develop into a robust countertrend rather than a shortlist hype.

Discussion

This exploratory study was not intended to make specific recommendations to promote more, more beautiful or greener gardens, for example. Others have already made a number of attempts to do this, as described earlier. However, a few provisional ideas for bringing these goals closer are set out below.

Urban development, private and public space

There was a lack of consensus among urban developers in the post-war period regarding the desirability of private gardens in towns. Modernist (high-rise) builders argued that people would not appreciate them, because gardening was seen as work. They got their own way to such a degree that, especially in suburban areas where gardens are very common, it is indeed the case that many people do not enjoy gardening. But residents do value having their own plot of land where they can feel free. In addition to the sharply increased land prices, this led to gardens being made relatively small.

There are also residential settings with blocks of flats, where residents have virtually no gardens of their own. In both cases, garden-lovers benefit from having an alternative location to enjoy their hobby. Garden complexes such as allotments and community gardens

demand more management (which to some extent can be organised informally), but can also offer a high-value amenity for the neighbourhood with relatively low maintenance costs. Allotment complexes are increasingly being opened up to a wider public, while most community gardens already are. Combinations of a modest garden around the home and supplementary gardens in the public space for real gardeners appear to be a workable formula for putting the public space in the hands of people with green fingers as far as possible, though this does require appropriate management structures in order to prevent exclusion and deal with changes in use. They also prevent the maximum monetary value being obtained from the land, but on the other hand can improve neighbourhood contacts and possibly produce health benefits if people engage in gardening. However, as Veen (2015) has also stated, setting expectations too high can lead to disappointment.

Private ownership and collective interest

Another discussion, concerns the extent to which garden-owners can be expected to take account of public interests when designing their gardens. This was the case in pre-war garden villages, for example, where it was prohibited to erect fences, with only low hedges being allowed between gardens. The idea was to improve the appearance, including for walkers from less attractive neighbourhoods. This policy attracted criticism and the rules were increasingly broken, initially by erecting fences.

Today, an appeal is also being made to garden-owners, but this time it relates mainly to the paving of gardens. It is questionable whether imposing rules can more or less force people to design their gardens in a climate-friendly way. Those rules do not currently exist, at least not in the forthcoming Environment Act (*Omgevingswet*). And if they did exist, they would undoubtedly encounter resistance; individualisation and informalisation in society have had a major influence here, however regrettable that may be for those who like to see attractive gardens. However, imposing a duty to devote attention to gardening alongside work, parenting, providing informal care and doing voluntary work would seem to have little chance of success.

By contrast, an information campaign, combined with a charge levied on those with paved gardens for cleaning surface water and overloaded drains, might be worth considering. It may also be possible to find a technical solution, such as perforated paving slabs. That is something that could be studied.

Green education

Gardening was something that members of the working class were encouraged to do in the 19th and 20th centuries, as a means of improving and embellishing their lives. There were plenty of people who did not take up these calls or who neglected their gardens, but others responded positively. Gardening currently forms a brief part of the primary school curriculum (one garden season spent in the school garden), but that is generally as far as it goes. Experiences with community gardens suggest that many children find the process interesting, which means these gardens have an additional educational function. Those

involved in the campaigns to enthuse a wide public about more natural gardening also deserve support.

There may be ways of building the transfer of knowledge about plants and nature, as happens with social gardening in the form of volunteering by older persons, where knowledge is transferred from expert to lay person, accompanied by social initiatives for those who would like a more living, green garden but do not know how to achieve it. The media and commerce could also take on a social role by seeking to raise public enthusiasm for gardens which require little maintenance but are still green and satisfying. Many garden architects are already adopting this approach, but it could perhaps “wider public” by providing more information about robust, low-maintenance plants.

Further research

As is so often the case, every answer raises new questions which may be worth studying. An example is deepening our understanding of the motives of people who pave their gardens. We know about the practical considerations, such as pressure of time and lack of interest in gardening, but to what extent do other aspects also play a role, such as a need for structure and clarity and a dislike of nature, as has been suggested?

Another question concerns the robustness of community gardens and their precise significance. Research to date has focused mainly on legitimising such amenities by demonstrating that they deliver social added value in the form of social cohesion and health benefits. But there are also questions to be asked about the future outlook. To what extent are these amenities predetermined to be scrapped as soon as the housing market picks up sufficiently to cash in on the value of the land for new housing construction? Which organisational and management models are robust and which are not? And to what extent do amenities of this type form a strategic addition to allotment complexes, thanks to their proximity to homes and the small plots?

Finally, it would be an easy matter to investigate on the basis of the next edition of the Time Use Survey whether the various social and educational initiatives intended to discourage grey and encourage green gardening, have achieved a degree of traction yet.

Bijlagen

B 1.1 Geïnterviewde personen

André Doffer, senior consultant Retail en Leisure bij SAMR (SmartAgent MarketResponse); telefoongesprek 20 januari 2016.

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Herman Vroklage, sinds 1992 woordvoerder van de belangenvereniging voor volkstuinders AVVN, *face to face* interview 6 mei 2010.

Bewoner Zoetermeer, geïnterviewd voor Bundel Informele Groepen (Kullberg 2011a), 27 april 2010.

Korte *face to face* interviews met dertig bezoekers van een plantenmarkt van de personeelsvereniging van het ministerie van vws, 30 mei 2012.

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Groepsgesprek op 12 april 2012, met een vervolg op 15 april 2012, tuinclub Juffertje in 't Groen te Amersfoort.