

Miracle gardens, Varazdin, Croatia

Project description

Instead of waiting for city officials to start a community garden project on their own the residents asked them for land and non-financial support. This way the city government did not have to use its own capacity to start and manage the project and neither did it have to spend money for maintaining the land. A newly formed residents' non-profit association took responsibility for the land by signing an agreement with the city. The association undertook all the operational tasks needed to prepare the plots for interested residents. We designed how the land was going to be used, and where to put important infrastructure elements like water pumps and tool sheds. Then we invited all interested citizens through local city newspapers and received a response from all age groups, from 18 to 70 year olds.

Since many people are inexperienced at vegetable cultivation we connected with other associations specialized in seed-saving and organic gardening so we could teach our gardeners the basics of gardening along with the importance of saving seeds and local food production. This way we enabled them to be more independent from increasing food prices which is extremely important if we consider that more than 35% of the average Croatian salary is spent on food. If we consider organic food this percentage could only be higher because organic produce is hardly affordable even to middle class people.



Individual garden plots are 50 metres square, which is enough to cover vegetable needs for two adult persons. Each plot is rented for a symbolic fee of €15 per year and at the end of the year the gardener can decide if he wants to extend the rent. In case he decides to leave there is already a waiting list of people who are ready to take over the garden. With approximately 100 gardeners the project's yearly budget is €1500 which makes it financially completely self-sustainable, so all donations we receive could be spent on gardening workshops and raising ecological awareness through seminars and lectures, not just for gardeners but also for the general public. Last year's donation of €15 000 will be spent for improving the garden infrastructure and all interested gardeners are involved in the planning and decision making process. We are always encouraging them to become more involved in the garden community than just cultivating their own garden. We are doing this in different ways like shed and shelter-building workshops, management of parts of the common land, helping new gardeners, organizing food celebrations etc.



The association which started the project was formed by 4 volunteers and after the project was established we asked interested gardeners to help us with organization. At the moment there are 10 of us who actively volunteer on improving and developing the gardens further, especially focusing on developing low-tech solutions in the energy and building sector, and also innovative methods in water pumping and irrigation. Where possible we are connecting with other associations and initiatives who are also working on developing similar solutions. Working examples and solutions are to be presented to the general public so they can incorporate them in their lives to make them more sustainable and independent.

In just a couple of months the garden was recognized as an extremely successful social project and received massive media coverage. It appeared more than 60 times in newspaper articles, TV reports, radio interviews and web articles. We are being approached by many people all over Croatia and also our city officials are often contacted by other city governments with questions on how to copy the same model in their cities. In addition, our association is often mentioned by our city council as a great example of cooperation between citizens and the authorities. At the moment there are similar projects in development in at least two other Croatian cities.

