

LEE LI MING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Allotment Farms for Older Adults in Asian Cities

Singapore, Tokyo, and
Taipei¹

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Allotment farms have been creatively implemented in under-utilized urban spaces in high-density Asian cities, where most of the land is often prioritised for economic gains. As a type of urban green space, allotment farms serve as a temporary reprieve from the stressors of urban life and contribute to the improvement of people's health (Hawkins, Mercer, Thirlaway, & Clayton, 2013). Older adults who engage in urban farming/gardening fare better in physical activity health and positive self-perception compared to those who do not (Harada et al., 2021).

Practices and considerations of allotment farming vary in high-density Asian cities. This web post note explores case studies showing how allotment farming is practiced in Singapore, Tokyo, and Taipei. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of how effective allotment

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

farming is as a form of recreation for older adults, as well as the positive impact such farming activities would have on residents.

Allotment Gardening in Parks – Singapore

Since November 2017, the National Parks Board of Singapore (NParks) introduced allotment gardening plots for people to rent amid the Allotment Gardening Scheme. The scheme includes allocation of more than 1,000 allotment gardening plots in 18 parks and gardens in the country by 2021.² These parks and gardens are situated close to Housing & Development Board flats, where most Singaporeans stay. Amid the rising popularity of gardening among Singaporeans, these plots allow residents to pick up gardening as a form of recreation. NParks also hopes that gardening could be used as a method to incentivise people to engage with their communities and cultivate a deeper appreciation for nature.

Allotment gardening has the potential to give residents an active role in Singapore's food resilience. It would encourage more people to engage in gardening as a means to form closer ties with neighbours and have a closer contact with nature. More importantly, allotment gardening has shown to keep older adults occupied through interaction with the crops they cultivate, bringing positive outcomes not only for their social and physical health, but improving their sleeping pattern,

² More than 280 new allotment gardening plots at 4 parks open for application on Nov 29, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore>

psychological health and cognitive function as well (Sia et al., 2020).

Box 1: Allotment Gardening in Singapore



Source: Dawn Ang (2020).

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/nparks-new-allotment-gardening-plots-applications-open-nov-29-13532230>. Accessed 2 July, 2021.

- More than 1,000 allotment gardens across a dozen of Singapore's parks.
- Each allotment garden plot measures 2.5m by 1m and can be leased for 3 years by the public for 57 SGD annually.
- 1,436 plots have been leased out to the public (as of November 2020).

Sources: Rina Chandran (2019).

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-landrights-food-idUSKCN1RR1D5>. Accessed 2 July, 2021.

Shimin Nōen – Tokyo, Japan

The concept of the *shimin nōen*, or resident gardens as they are known in Japan, has existed since the Edo period. Their popularity has been growing in recent decades, as there are approximately 2.5 times more gardens in Japan now compared to 20 years ago. Shimin nōen are areas of farmlands rented from farmers by

[re/nparks-new-allotment-gardening-plots-applications-open-nov-29-13532230](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/nparks-new-allotment-gardening-plots-applications-open-nov-29-13532230), Accessed 23 August 2021.

the municipal government. Subdivided garden lots are in turn rented out to the city residents (Harada et al., 2021). Gardens often have places for people to stay and maximize the time spent taking care of their crops. Garden owners sometimes opt to take a day trip down to their allotment garden plots from the city. These plots are usually in the outskirts of cities and not too far from their homes.³

Box 2: Prominence of *shimin nōen*



Source: Nippon.com (2018).
<https://www.nippon.com/en/features/h00206/>
Accessed 4 July, 2021.

- 4,223 *shimin nōen* nationwide, divided into approximately 188,000 different plots.
- 1,371 hectares of land dedicated to *shimin nōen*.
- Often include tools for new farmers to start off smoothly: farming tools, seeds and seedlings, fertilizer, guidance from experienced farmers.
- Creative initiatives implemented by non-profit organizations and businesses, such as allotment gardens equipped with barbeque pits, to promote communal bonding and interactions.

Source:
Nippon.com (2018).
<https://www.nippon.com/en/features/h00206/>
Accessed 4 July 2021.

About 80% of residents live in apartments with no private gardens in Tokyo, one of the largest megacities in the world. This results in very low interaction between residents and nature. As such, allotment gardening provides opportunities for residents of Tokyo to interact with nature and pursue a healthy lifestyle. (Soga et al., 2017).

Happy Gardens – Taipei, Taiwan

As part of Taipei's 2015 Garden City Programme, more under-utilized spaces in Taipei have been converted into sites for local communities to plant and maintain food crops. Garden City is a government initiative to create hundreds of green space pockets dedicated to urban farming. The initiative has eventually been termed as Happy Gardens by the local populace.

Happy Gardens were made possible due to the lifting of a ban that restricted people from utilizing vacant plots of land and buildings belonging to the public sector. This allowed people to map out and identify suitable lands for urban farming within Taipei's densely populated urban fabric. Eventually, several gardens were formed, often adjacent to existing urban infrastructure, such as metro stations, department stores and factories. Happy Gardens give visual and physical reprieve to the local community as a rare green space within a dense concrete jungle.⁴

³ Growing Popularity of Allotment Gardens in Urban Japan,
<https://www.nippon.com/en/features/h00206/#to>,
Accessed 23 August 2021

⁴ Making Spaces for Edible Gardens in Compact Cities: The Taipei Case,
<https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2021/03/02/making-spaces-for-edible-gardens-in-compact-cities-the-taipei-case/>, Accessed 23 August 2021

Box 3: Taipei Garden City Programme



Source: Wan-Yu Shih (2021).

<https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2021/03/02/making-spaces-for-edible-gardens-in-compact-cities-the-taipei-case/>. Accessed 5 July, 2021.

The Taipei Garden City Programme includes four types of gardens:

- Happy Gardens (30%)
- Green Roofs (11%)
- School Gardens (45%)
- Allotment gardens (14%)

Community gardens on ground level are more popular in Taipei, as it is more visually and physically accessible to the local community.

Rooftop gardens often face problems relating to safety and building management, thus less popular.

Self-help groups were established by the local community to protect these 'happy gardens', when they were being cleared for residential developments.

An alternative to Happy Gardens was to convert certain areas within park spaces into urban farms. Either way, these Happy Gardens have been documented to be important in the utilization of under-utilized vacant land by the local community, and have also proven to be one of the most effective methods to provide open spaces for residents (Hsiao, 2021). Most importantly, Happy Gardens have become very popular with residents as a social space to interact with their

neighbours while growing crops, as well as alleviate factors contributing to mental illness.

Conclusion

Allotment farming in Singapore, Tokyo, and Taipei, as shown in the case studies, is an effective means of recreation for older adults. The core reasons for allotment farming in these 3 cities are similar, owing mainly to rising interest in urban plant cultivation as a temporary reprieve from the perceived dullness of extremely dense urban landscape.

Singapore's limited land area suggests allotment gardens have to be creatively implemented within its urban core – e.g., in parks and under-utilized spaces, such as rooftops of offices, public housing, and multi-storey carparks. Cities with hinterlands, such as Tokyo and Taipei, have wider options to set up allotment gardens outside the urban core, or travel down to the city outskirts. As such, differences in allotment farming methods correspond to the specific physical conditions and challenges of each city. They also highlight diverse opportunities for creative implementation of urban allotment farming in Asian cities.

References

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