



# The Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture – A tool to increase the stakeholder interaction

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## **Abstract**

Urban agriculture is spreading in Germany. Nevertheless, a comprehensive, structured and detailed database on gardens and farms that would provide a consistent basis for research, but also the opportunity for broad networking of practitioners, is missing. To close this gap, the inter- and transdisciplinary research project INNSULA establishes in narrow collaboration with stakeholders of urban agriculture the Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture. The core of it is the collection of factsheets on projects and enterprises of urban agriculture. These factsheets provide, among others, data on structure, cultivation methods, contacts and self-evaluation of each garden or farm. In other parts of the Knowledge Collection descriptions of and contacts to organisations, municipalities and research projects as well as scientific and practical literature are provided. The online database is developed in an iterative way together with stakeholders and the content is added by the users – creating a living networking and information tool.

## **Introduction**

In Germany the debate about urban agriculture emerged over the past years. Particularly new forms of urban agriculture like community gardens or start-ups operating the innovative urban organic farming concept of "Selbsternte" (Vogl, C. R., P. Axmann und B. Vogl-Lukasser 2004) are increasingly discussed in the public, especially in the media. The number of urban agricultural projects is rising each year.

Still, well-structured information about initiatives and companies in the field of urban agriculture in Germany scarcely exists. Scientific literature on the topic is rare. Most publications belong to grey literature and often focus on specific types of urban agriculture like community gardens (Arndt, Haidle und Rosol 2004; Gröning 1995; Meyer-Renschhausen 2011; Müller 2011; Rosol 2010). This is also reflected by the scant availability of urban agriculture online platforms. In Germany, we observe few attempts to show the broader picture of urban agriculture, their lighthouses being the webpages on urban agriculture of the foundation group "Anstiftung und Ertomis" ([www.anstiftung-ertomis.de](http://www.anstiftung-ertomis.de)) and "urbanacker.net" ([www.urbanacker.net](http://www.urbanacker.net)). Unfortunately they still have some shortcomings. Both do not yet cover all activities in UA – leaving out e.g. the activities in allotment gardens. Moreover urban agriculture companies are hardly to detect. One of them is only a link-list, the other provides project descriptions, but they are not structured in a consistent way. This is well understandable, regarding the voluntary background of their establishment.

For scientific research with the focus on Germany it is important to know the existing gardening projects and business companies in the field of urban agriculture. Especially data like their self-image regarding sustainability, contact persons, area under cultivation and legal constitution, etc. are important information e.g. for the choice of case study areas or scientific analysis. Therefore, from a scientific point of view, a clearer structured and prepared project data is preferable.

The objective of this text is to show the development of a comprehensive platform on urban agriculture, the Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture.

## **Methods**

The establishment of the Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture (OKCUA) takes several working steps: data structuring (factsheet and overall database), data collection, database programming, maintenance. It consists of different entities, the heart of which is the factsheet collection on urban agricultural projects and companies. The other branches cover further information concerning the field of urban agriculture, e.g. organisations, research projects and best-practice examples.

In the first step, based on literature and online analysis of relevant aspects, the factsheet for urban agriculture projects and companies is developed. It builds the frame for the data, structuring the information uniformly. It is revised and completed by the editorial team, which consists of different stakeholders and scientists. Moreover, the structure of the overall database is established and discussed together with the editorial team.

At the same time, the collection of available data on urban agriculture projects and companies from literature and online sources is started. It represents the input basis for the Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture. As the aim is to establish a living database, the urban agriculture projects and companies as well as organisations, experts, etc. are asked whether they accept publishing and to complete their entry. The users are also able to add new entries.

The programming is based on the Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 and refers to the already established knowledge collection "openLandscapes". The domain is provided by

urbanacker.net. A prototype of the online database is programmed and revised by the editorial team. Then the final version is established.

The maintenance is carried out by the editorial team and the users of the Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture.

The establishment of the Online Knowledge Collection is thus an iterative process and a participatory approach. The participation takes place in two ways. (1) Already in the first steps, representatives of the different interest groups like the foundation group "Anstiftung und Ertomis", urbanacker.net, allotment organisation, municipal administration, researchers and activists were invited to discuss and form the content of the OKCUA and to be part of the editorial team. (2) In a more general way, as the different stakeholders (activists, entrepreneurs, municipalities, researchers) in the field of urban agriculture are invited to be part of the collection, actually - to be the collection.

The participatory approach is essential, as the use of the OKCUA should not remain a mere scientific one. Otherwise the OKCUA, once the research project is finished, would sooner or later gather dust in a remote corner of the internet. To overcome the short lifespan of research projects is an important challenge, and by initiating a multi-actor and multi-purpose editorial team, public project funding for INNSULA has a good chance to become a long term asset. Moreover the OKCUA has the potential to address some pressing issues.

Especially for municipal administrations information is needed on the already existing and possible forms of urban agriculture in order to create policy strategies that consider urban agriculture as a tool for sustainable development, participation and social cohesion within the city.

On the other hand the urban gardeners and farmers are provided with an instrument for networking and profiling in the context of subsidy and policy programmes.

### **Intermediate Results**

Up to now, contact and other data for about 260 urban agriculture projects in Germany have been collected and partly already inserted into the prototype of the online database. Moreover the structure of the factsheets and the database get more and more elaborated. The final version should go online in summer 2012 and will constantly be updated.

The factsheets consist now of three parts. The first is a more general one, providing information on the type of urban agriculture (community garden, self-harvest enterprise, etc.), a general description, pictures, movies, links and contact information. The second deals more with structural information, like area, members, workers, legal form, financing, but also with cultivation principles (conventional, integrated, biological/dynamic) and methods as well as expertise for certain issues. The last part is a self-evaluation concerning the importance of the economic, ecological and social impact of the project/company.

The general database consists of six branches (see Figure 1): (1) News, (2) Urban agriculture in practice (Factsheet collection, Best Practice Examples and Expert-Lists) (3) Organisations, (4) Cities and Municipalities (activities and contact persons), (5) Research (research projects and scientific experts), (6) Literature (scientific and practical). The content of the other five branches, besides from the factsheet collection, is still in the discussion. Also the general wording and structure is still open. Further on, other content might be added, e.g. a Wiki-glossary for important terms in the urban agriculture context. But this depends on the capabilities of the editorial team.

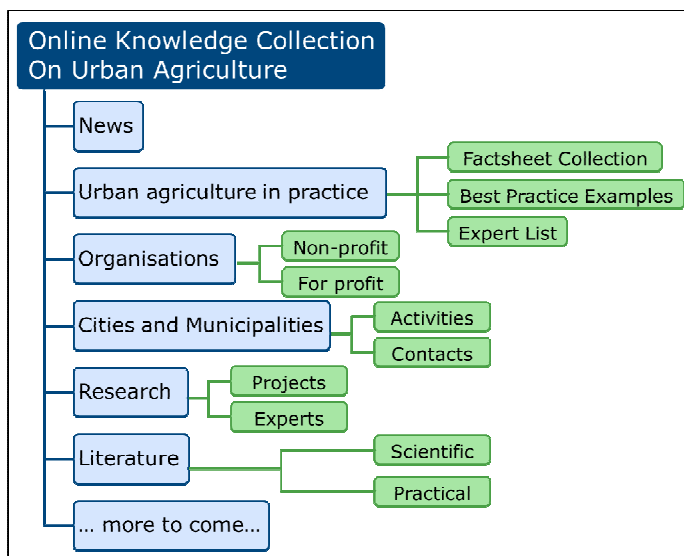


Figure 1: Structure and contents of the Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture (April 2012)

For the selection of a garden or a farm, apart from different search opportunities (name, type, city) a map of Germany displaying all projects will be available.

## Conclusion

The Online Knowledge Collection On Urban Agriculture fills in the scientific gap on better structured and more detailed information on urban agriculture in Germany, fostering research in this field.

At the same time, it makes an important contribution to increase the communication between the different stakeholders of urban agriculture. Particularly experiences and knowledge in gardening techniques, self-images and participative practices can be shared among the gardeners and farmer. Thus, tacit knowledge becomes open knowledge and gives policy makers various possibilities to subsidy projects and companies. Thus it is a step towards a transition of attitudes towards and organisation of urban agriculture.

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