

## RURAL LIFE IN THE CITY: THE CHALET GARDEN IN DENMARK

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**Abstract:** Allotment gardens with small cottages make a rural lifestyle partially available in urban areas. Temporary living quarters, combined with the tending of annual and perennial plants, let urbanites coexist with nature for a few months out of the year. This paper investigates the history and social life these gardens play in Denmark. A particular garden, Sano near Copenhagen, is considered in some detail.

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### Introduction

Being in nature and interacting with it has a great appeal for people, including urbanites. Some people choose to be closer to nature by gardening in their backyard (if they have one) or by cultivating fruits, vegetables and flowers in a community garden plot. For many people, an escape to natural surroundings requires long travel, be it to a vacation cottage in the mountains or a house by the shore for a summer of relaxation. For American urbanites who would like to have a summer home, but cannot afford one, there is no middle ground. However, this sort of opportunity is readily available in the allotment gardens of Denmark where nature and leisure come together within the city's boundary.

It is just this combination in Danish allotment gardens, where simple living and nature coexist for a few months out of the year, that creates a rural lifestyle in an urban area. Allotment gardens exist in Denmark because of their cultural acceptance and protection, ability to increase the diversity in urban areas, and the gardeners' desire to have their own piece of nature. These gardens are green spaces of beauty and character. With all of this information it was not very difficult to answer the question -- What are the most significant elements that make up an allotment garden to give it meaning to the member gardeners?

### History of Danish Allotments

**Early allotments.** The Kolonihaveforbundet for Danmark (Danish Allotment Garden Federation) keeps a record of the history of Danish allotment gardens. In the late Middle Ages (1350-1450) gardens were outside of town walls to supply vegetables to burghers (a citizen of a borough, usually owning a house within the city limits, and prosperous enough to hire others to work for them). The town of Fredericia in Jutland has a town plan dating to 1665 requiring gardens outside the town wall, designating one garden for growing vegetables per household. Gardens were leased by authorities to individuals and were to eventually be privately owned. The Royal ordinance states:

"This field which is now used by the municipal authorities and which consists of 48 parcels of land, is to be added to the town so that each plot follows its site. The local authorities have entire disposal of the 11 similar garden parcels. Deeds shall be delivered, and decrees shall be issued so as to ensure that the extent of each parcel is not reduced or enlarged, and that nothing but chalets are built on the land. Furthermore, upon the delivery of the deed, the gardens shall be given to the owners for life."

These small gardens then developed into pauper gardens in the 18th century with the sole purpose to avoid greed and lessen poverty. From 1821-1823 public authorities laid out about nineteen gardens in Haderslev, Tønder, and Åbenrå. Åbenrå Allotment was founded in 1823 and is now preserved as one of the oldest allotment gardens in Denmark.

In 1828 King Frederik VI of Denmark ordered all Boards of Guardians to give land to burghers. "The purpose is not to give full relief to the poor burghers, but merely to help needy craftsmen or other impecunious heads of families become more or less self-sufficient in fruits and vegetables, through spending their spare time growing the garden-helped by their wife and children and to keep household heads from idleness." Over time gardens were also laid out in Århus, Fredericia, Nyborg and Odense. King Frederik VI's gardening interest encouraged the establishment of these gardens. However, they also resulted in response to the poor economy after the Napoleonic wars (1792-1815), resulting in day laborers becoming members of the working class. Many pauper gardens failed because the Board of Guardians was not prepared for the garden expenses. In addition the gardens were located in poor soil conditions and crop yield was poor. They remained until the beginning of the 20th century, at the same time as the collective chalet gardens.

In the 1880s and 1890s there was increased interest in small gardens and private landowners began to rent plots to workers on individual contracts. The Industrial Revolution, country to city migration, poor housing, and an increase in population all contributed to this increased interest in allotment gardens. Laborers working and living under the same stressful social and economic conditions came together to form the Danish Social Democratic Party in the 1870s. Part of their plan for action was to organize cottage garden sites. Garden colonies, or allotment gardens, were 18th century communal sites. In Ålborg in 1884, Jørgen Berthelsen a member of the Danish Parliament, began the first allotment site. The idea was to parcel government-owned land into garden plots for workers. No one wanted to help, so Jørgensen leased the municipality land himself and parceled 85 plots to sublease to 'Arbejderforening af 1865' members. The cost was 14 kr. (Danish kr.onor) per plot (same as workers' weekly wage). The government's opinion changed after seeing the success of the plots and that the produce helped workers regain their strength and energy at work. A members' board was responsible for overseeing the daily operations of the garden, establishing order, keeping the accounts and holding meetings.

**Garden Associations.** In 1892 Det Københavnske Haveselskab formed. Its was as a non-political horticultural society dedicated to arouse interest for using and growing garden products amongst people of humble means. The first association was on Christianshavns Vold on Amager (later known as Vennelyst). Distributors or brokers made money from the individual contracts of increasing the already high rent and Det Københavnske Haveselskab refused to have a board to oversee daily operations. Today the distinct garden layout of very small gardens and tiny chalets can still be seen, and is by many tourists. Future allotment sites were modeled after Arbejdernes and Det. In 1907 there were 2000 chalet gardens in Denmark and the numbers continued to increase with workers finding more sites.

In 1908 Kolonihavelejerforeningen (originally the Chalet Garden Holders' Association and then called the Association of Chalet Gardens in Denmark) was founded with the sole purpose to create a stronger position for negotiating with the local and central governments. It was the first union of allotment gardens in Denmark. "The purpose of the association is first of all to achieve reasonable and, if possible, uniform contracts with the authorities for all garden holders who have rented their gardens with them, second to work for a promotion of the chalet garden matter and third try to prevent enterprising companies to act as intermediary between owner and leaseholder." In 1916 it transformed into a nation-wide association that looked out for the needs of all Danish allotment gardens and became the Kolonihaveforbundet for Danmark.

The Kolonihaveforbundet for Danmark (Allotment Garden Federation of Denmark) has twenty-seven board members today, led by chairman, Ivan Larsen, three vice-chairmen, and thirty-five advisors spread around Denmark. Each is carefully chosen and approved by the Danish Government and the advisor at the Ministry of Agriculture, Evvind Thorsen. Allotment ownership is not required to be a part of this association. It publishes a garden magazine six times a year and distributes it to each individual member. At its peak in the 1950s it represented 62,000 member and 40,000 non-member gardeners. In 1990 it there were 45,000 members and 20,000 non-member gardeners.

#### **Current Situation for Allotment Gardens**

**Laws and Regulations.** Allotments are recognized in various local and national governmental laws. Some examples where allotments are mentioned concern the noise level of high-speed ferry routes and windmills, the use of contaminated soil, the control of rat outbreaks, waste management, and Denmark's strategy for sustainability.

A new Danish law was recently passed protecting "permanent" allotment gardens. Fredriksberg and Tårnby Municipalities initiated the new law because of public opposition to their building on allotment sites. The government and the gardeners realized it was time that to protect these historic green areas before they are all gone. November 1, 2001 was the deadline for garden owners to apply to the Ministry of the Environment for permanent

status. A committee was set up to gather information and propose what gardens could be permanent or not. The general requirements to be a permanent garden are: (1) they must be within city limits, (2) each individual garden is limited to 400 square meters, (3) the gardens cannot be located in existing green space that is part of residential areas, (4) buildings are allowed for overnight use and storing tools, and (5) houses cannot be lived in year round. There was also an agreement signed in 1993 that gave 25 years protection to allotments owned by the municipality. It is still in effect for those that were determined to be temporary. After that time, the municipality will decide any further agreement or changes.

There are 92 organized allotment gardens in Copenhagen that accommodate approximately 5,400 overnight and 3,600 day garden plots. The municipality owns 68 of the sites and 24 are privately owned. There are also six year-round gardens where the plots are not considered allotments and therefore are not covered under the law. As of now it is illegal to live in those year-round; there are discussions underway to make them legal. There were three meetings with gardeners from the six allotments nearest the rapidly expanding Ørestad development. It was decided that only two would be temporary and the rest would be permanent.

**Organizations Involved with protecting allotments.** In 1911 the Danmarks Naturfredningsforening 7 (Danish Society for the Conservation of Nature) was created. It is the largest environmental association in Denmark with representatives in each municipality. They have significant political power because they are so large and influential. It is the only association in Denmark allowed to conserve areas. It only recently became involved with allotments because of interest from its membership. The first example was in 1999 when gardeners in H/F (Haveforening, meaning a Garden Association) Dalgas in Fredriksberg Municipality came to the Society asking for help to protect their gardens. It was made a permanent garden on November 1st and is the first garden to be conserved in Denmark. They just received a new proposal to help save a garden in Essence, Funen in mid-October 2001. Prior to the new law, municipalities were in charge of any protection or destruction of allotments.

As the allotments get older so do the structures that are on them. New, modern summerhouses are replacing old houses. Even today there are still old houses left, but most have been built on to and the old-fashioned one room house now has two or three rooms. Presently it is the trend for young families to stay in the city and have an allotment, instead of moving to the country to have a family. There is a new generation ready to carry on the tradition of allotment gardens.

Many allotments were placed on polluted land because it was cheap and available, which was the point when allotments started. The Grøn (Green) Information Office had a research paper on a study conducted by the Danish EPA (Miljøbutikken) on eating vegetables, fruits, and berries from contaminated soil. It showed that if

thoroughly washed and peeled eating these vegetables and fruits will not cause any problems. The following are the metals studied on nine allotment gardens: arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, nickel, lead, and zinc. The following are the PAH compounds looked for in Skagen (an area outside Copenhagen): acenaphthylene, fluoranthene, benzofluoranthene, benzopyrene and indenopyrene. The fruits and vegetables tested were potato, carrot, lettuce, radish, bean squash, pear, plum, gooseberry, hip, blackberry, elderberry, currant, and hazelnut.

**Obtaining an allotment garden.** Typically the cost range is 10,000-100,000 kr. (\$1200-\$1,800) to buy, and 2,000-3,000 kr. (\$236-\$350) per year to rent. If an allotment is municipality-owned it will be rented, which is cheaper. It could also be a co-operative association where each gardener owns a share of the land, which is expensive.

Each allotment garden has a waiting list of people who want a garden. It helps to know someone in the gardens rather than just signing up to try to get one. It follows the saying that "it's not what you know, it's who you know." The waiting list for a Kolonihavehus (garden plot) in Vennelyst is about 25 years, and even in others that are not so well known the time frame is about the same. People keep their gardens for many, many years and in their family until they can no longer maintain it.

#### **Study Methods**

In order to sufficiently study Danish allotment gardens I divided my data gathering into social use patterns (plot use, activities, maintenance, type of users, distance traveled, and length/time of use) and historical use patterns (previous land use, reason for garden and its activities, and the lay out). Periodic observations involved visiting the sites on different days at varying times to observe activities in the plots and the gardens by the gardeners. I also took counts of people and noted what they were doing.

Interviewing was the most effective tool to understand how the gardens operate, to learn the importance of the gardens to the gardeners, and to see why outside forces (organizations, government) are involved. It was through this type of conversation that I learned about the regulations of and on the gardens, people's everyday patterns in the summer and the winter, and people's opinions toward allotment gardens. I talked with six

gardeners from Sano, and five people from organizations involved with allotments.

Drawing, taking pictures and mapping out the context and layout of the gardens were also important tools in studying the allotment gardens. These helped me to analyze the gardens better and to understand why people did the activities they did. The context of both of these gardens is more than what exists at present; it is the adjacent future development that will have the most impact on them.

#### **Haveforening Sano: A Cottage Allotment Garden**

It is unsure as to what the name means. It might be Latin and mean purity, sanitary, and clean or it might be from Samosvej, a nearby street, or it might even be from an industrial chemical for orchards. A lost piece of history, very similar to the old houses that are taken down without thought as to their importance. The following is the information I learned about H/F Sano.

The context is made up of apartment complexes to the north, south, and west (where most of the gardeners live), a hotel to the north, and abandoned railroad tracks all along the eastern boundary. These railroad tracks serve an important social function; they are where people walk their dogs. They also provide a back entrance for three gardens in Sano.

**Residents.** Residents typically have had a garden in Sano for a long time; among those I interviewed, it had been between 6 and 33 years. Most have apartments nearby, ranging from across the street to a few of kilometers away. Some have cars, but most use bicycles for transportation. Clearly this is a way of life for them. Everyone mentioned that his or her most common activity way just relaxing. Along with relaxing goes hanging out with friends and family.

**Overall garden plan.** The garden plan has been the same, or at least very similar, since it was first built in 1929. Many of the original one-room houses still exist within the additions and changed exteriors. The pathways are all gravel, except for the asphalt Festplads, and are maintained by the adjacent garden owner. This includes being raked daily and free of weeds to keep a clean appearance. The geometric, uniform plots are similar to most allotment gardens. The one exception is the Round Gardens in Naerum, which were specially designed.

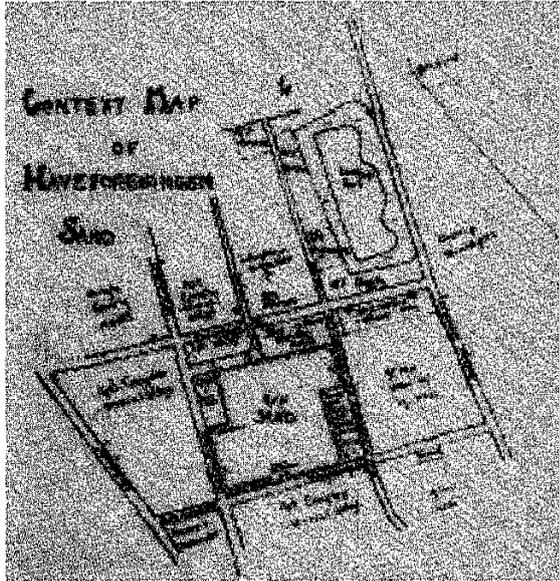


Figure 1. Context map of Sano.

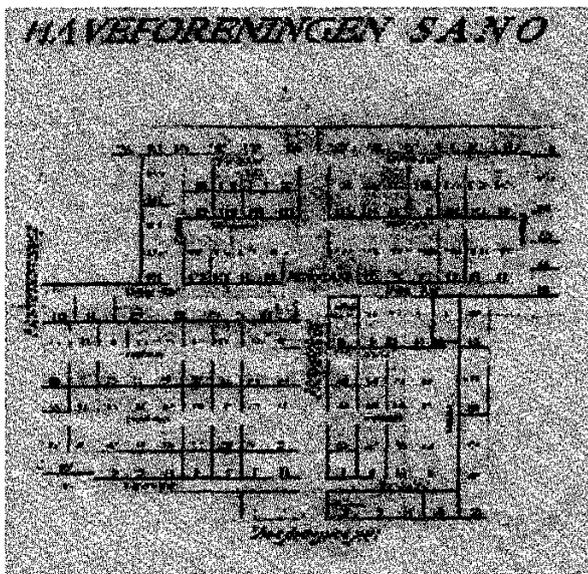


Figure 2. Plan of plots in Sano.

**Gardening.** Along with relaxing, gardening is the most common activity. The approaches to gardening seem to be very diverse, though generally laid-back rather than intense. Some residents focused on flowers; others mixed flowers and vegetables. Everyone had shrubs and trees as well as bedded plants. Most seem to add something new each year, or just move things around a little bit. Often one person has the primary responsibility for the garden. There is a big cleanup in the fall just before closing. Families

typically visit their garden between once a week or month during the winter.

**Cost and size.** The basic current price for a garden is 100 kr. (\$12) per square meter. However, the quality, age, and size of the house, as well as the garden plants and any remaining furniture also help to determine the price. It is the board that makes the final decision. The older the house is, the less expensive it is. A typical plot size is 301 square meters, but it varies between 200-400 square meters.

Having an allotment is considered a middle class luxury, not a rich one. The thought is that they (the gardeners) can't afford to have a real house with a garden, so they settle with this small plot of land and a small house.

Three houses were torn down this year (2%), which is usual for the fall time. There was also one roof repair, one internal repair; and the oldest, untouched house (actually might be 10% of the plot) was sold and will be torn down.

**The Board.** Every April is a meeting to vote on either the foreman or the treasurer because they alternate in terms. Both positions are for a minimum of two years and are paid 1000 kr. (\$120) per month. There are seven members: one foreman, one treasurer, one vice-foreman, two board members and two supplemental members. There are two to three board meetings in the winter for everyone. Each position is voluntary. If someone decides they want to be the foreman and there is no one else who wants it, they will most likely get the position, unless the voting gardeners disagree. It is the board's duty to watch over the gardens and carry out daily tasks to keep everything running smoothly and efficiently.

**Rules and regulations.** The house can only be one story and ten per cent of the plot. Fire safety requires three meters between houses and the property boundary, which hasn't been followed in the past. Today any new house must follow this regulation. Fences should only be 180 cm. high. The chairman issues warnings to gardeners that have overgrown gardens, giving them the chance to be maintained or to lose the garden. It used to be that every five years was an assessment of the gardens to renew a contract, but that is no longer necessary with the new law protecting gardens. As of November 1, 2001, Sano is a protected garden. In order to have a garden in Sano one doesn't have to live nearby, but they do have to be Danish. As for garden care, chemicals are strongly discouraged.

**Safety.** Theft and safety are not usually problems. There were three break-ins last winter, which is very uncommon. The people who come every day in the winter or stay illegally year round keep an eye out for intruders and problems. Also throughout the winter, the gates are closed at all times. In the summer they are open from 8am to 8pm. Along the entire boundary of Sano is either a tall fence topped with barbed wire or a tall hedge for privacy and protection.

**Waste management.** Most gardeners can have a camp toilet that they must empty at the Festhus. They can also use the plumbing facilities in the Festhus. There is a movement to add showers and laundry facilities at Festhus too. Only recently has it been allowed to have a small holding tank in the ground. The least favorite part of living at Sano is having to empty the toilet.

In the Festplads is a large, red, unsightly trash receptacle. The residents sealed all regular trash in bags for odor control and then deposited here. In the fall there are two of trash receptacles because of houses being torn down and people moving out. Otherwise it is the responsibility of the

gardener to take all recyclable and construction items down the street to a recycling center.

**Threats from outside.** A proposal to use the railroad right-of-way for a new metro line from Center City to the airport will affect Sano. The initial design by the city was to make the metro above ground with tall barrier walls. These walls would block views and access to the Øresund by closing off several streets. The local residents want it to be underground, which would cost three times more than the planned budget. Because of the large public of dislike for the design, this section of the metro has been postponed at least five years. In February of 2002 a final decision will be made as to whether it will be underground or aboveground.

If the metro is above ground, it will remove some Sano gardens and create a large wall to look at. The land beyond the tracks is green space, but also potentially available for development. If the metro is built below ground the view and open space may still change. As one person I talked to said "that's one expensive dog walk."

### Conclusions

My main goal was to go Copenhagen to learn about allotment gardens, understand why they work, and why we don't have them in the US, and that is what I did. I tried to find out as much about allotments as I could by talking to the gardeners, to people in the government and associations, and to people who didn't even own an allotment to get their view on them. I can now say I know quite a bit on allotments; I wouldn't say everything, of course, because that wouldn't even be close to being accurate. My question was: What are the most significant elements that make up an allotment garden to give it meaning to the member gardeners? I didn't have to search for answers to this question I just did what I had planned to do -- observe, talk with people, and collect documents. In doing these research methods I came across the elements that make the gardens meaningful. It is having your own piece of land that you can call your own and do what you'd like with it. How else would someone in a city be able to build their own wall, lay a patio, or be able to sit under a tree they planted ten years ago? It isn't the landscaping that is the focus of all the maintenance; it's the perfectly manicured lawn. It is the freedom to get out of the apartment for the summer and into the sunshine. People are able to socialize and relax in the atmosphere they have created. There is a Danish word that fits this lifestyle perfectly -- *hygge*. Although the Danes say it cannot be translated it roughly means to be cozy and relaxed in warm surroundings with friends and/or family.

### Acknowledgements

Our gratitude is given to the Sano's residents who accepted me with open arms into their garden. Special thanks are also due to Jens Balsby Nielsen from The Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen for his guidance.

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## Resources

Danmarks Naturfredningsforening [Danish Society for the Conservation of Nature], Masnedøgade 20, DK-2100 København Ø. Internet: [www.dn.dk](http://www.dn.dk)

Grøn Information [Green Information], Nørregade 36 2nd sal, DK-1165 København K. Internet: [www.greeninfo.dk](http://www.greeninfo.dk)

Hovedstadens Udviklingsråd (HUR) [Greater Copenhagen Authority] 25, Gammel Køge Landevej 3, DK-2500 Valby. Internet: [www.hur.Dk](http://www.hur.Dk)

København Kommune [Copenhagen Municipality], Department of Roads and Parks, Njalsgade 13 4.sal, DK-2300 København S. Internet: [www.kk.dk](http://www.kk.dk)

\_\_\_, Recreation and Green Area Planning, Rådhuset, 3 rd floor, Room 11, DK-1599 København V

\_\_\_, Culture and Leisure Administration, Rådhuset, Ground Floor, 1599 København V

Kolonihaveforbundet for Danmark [Allotment Garden Federation of Denmark], Fredrikssundsvej 304A, DK-2700 Brønshøj

Miljøbutikken [Danish EPA], Information and Books, Læderstræde 1-3, DK-1212 København K. Internet: [www.mem.dk](http://www.mem.dk) or [www.mst.dk](http://www.mst.dk)