



## An agroecological garden as a pathway to encounters

Ever since remote times, when our ancestors climbed down out of the trees to explore the African plains, to modern humankind, the search for food has been ingrained in our “genetic markers”. During the Neolithic Age, hunter-gatherers gave way to the first agricultural peoples, who began selecting better seeds for farming and adopting the first livestock practices. Farmers thus transcended the experience of nomadism, assuming the sedentary life resulting from the need to cultivate new sources of nutrients.

Today, at the height of the 21st century, we are witnessing one of humankind’s most deeply rooted paradoxes: diseases and socio-environmental imbalances alongside the pursuit of food production. Agriculture has undergone many changes in this long history, with a major turning point after World War II, namely the Green Revolution. This meant a new project for global agriculture, imposing structural changes like intensive mechanization, the expansion of monocultures, land tenure concentration, and the use of incalculable amounts of pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Humankind has gone from subsistence agriculture to the other extreme: a market-oriented model where capital dictates the rules of the game. The Green Revolution went beyond, offering as part of its legacy the cultural and social usurpation of traditional peoples through standardization of practices and leveling of small farmers’ ancestral knowledge. The latter groups are now largely dependent on pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and industrial seeds. This mechanized, poisonous agricultural model also promotes rural exodus and greater alienation between the countryside and cities.

In cities, technology has set an explosive pace for daily life, further disconnecting us from the sources of food we consume. Eating is becoming plasticized, fast-food, and individualistic. We no longer pay attention to what we eat, but consume speed and practicality.

Fortunately, history has demonstrated our capacity to turn unfavorable scenarios around. One path in this reversal is agroecology. One of its pillars is to promote farming practices that are respectful of all beings, as well as a close relationship between the countryside and cities, in the search for dialogue between farmers and consumers, to supply healthy foods, free from chemical inputs, while promoting harmonious encounters.

Successful agroecological experiences are happening all across Brazil. At the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), on the Ilha do Fundão *campus*, various collectives work with agroecology as their main thrust. One important case is the UFRJ Agroecological Fair, drawing farmers from the municipality of Rio de Janeiro and farther afield, bringing producers and consumers together. Another example is the MUDA Extension Project, an agroecology collective coordinated by the UFRJ Polytechnic School, of which the Institute for Studies in Collective Health (IESC/UFRJ) is a member. The MUDA Extension Project provides training for creating and managing community vegetable gardens in the city, besides producing food crops on the university campus itself, applying an agroforestry system.

All these initiatives inspired the creation of the IESC Vegetable Garden in an underused area previously reserved for gardening. As the result of a collective effort involving the university administration, professors, and gardening and cleaning staff, the objectives are not



only the production of pesticide-free foods, but also to become a space for shared learning and creation, opening room in the city's fast pace for encounters and dialogues in the Institute's community.

Crop planting began in July 2016, and the first collaborative lunch was held in September, with a shared harvest, preparation of the salad, and a group meal. This encounter included students, professors, technical and administrative staff, and outsourced services workers, sharing the same meal and the experience of consuming fresh vegetables, harvested that same day and prepared as a group. The meal not only provided food for thought on our eating habits, but especially highlighted the interaction between distinct groups of university staff and students, who joined around the table, partaking of food, smiles, and encounters.

Thus, a place that was previously little known and rarely frequented in the Institute is now a source of inspiration for many community members whose daily activities include visiting the garden for various reasons: looking for information, planting seedlings, harvesting vegetables, exchanging experiences, or just relaxing for a moment.

The vegetable garden is going strong, and the network of "guardians" and stakeholders continues to grow, relieving our contemporary tendency to "take exile in work" as a result of the breakneck pace in the prevailing work model. The little vegetable garden has gone far beyond its original role. New encounters have blossomed, drawing people together, motivating, boosting self-esteem, and decreasing differences. Word of the garden's existence has spread and attracted other visitors from the university to this new space, affectionately nicknamed the "Green Nook" by one of the IESC/UFRJ employee-guardians.

The garden is a simple initiative, but it has already born fruit in so little time! In these encounters we reinvent ourselves, reclaiming our capacity to produce food with our own hands, collectively and without using chemical inputs. All this proves that a productive, less individualistic world is possible, with more sharing and encounters.

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