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Traditional Market Gardens Take Root Again In Istanbul

by: JENNIFER HATTAM

in: WORLD



10.10.14 - The purple skin of the Kavak **fig** is so thin that the fruit can be eaten whole, without peeling — and so fragile that it cannot be transported long distances. One of the few places this Istanbul delicacy is grown is a small market garden (known as a *bostan* in Turkish) in Rümeli Kavağı, a windswept waterfront settlement near where the Bosphorus Strait opens into the Black Sea.

"It's probably the last historical bostan along the Bosphorus, just 100 meters from the water. It's registered as green space, but threatened with development because of the third Bosphorus bridge being built nearby," explains Aleksandar Sopov, a Harvard University Ph.D. candidate in history and Middle Eastern studies who is researching Istanbul's Ottoman-era agriculture.

Fruits and vegetables were once widely grown within city limits, with many neighborhoods becoming well known for their specialty produce. Istanbul old-timers still wax poetic about the flavorful romaine lettuce of **Yedikule**, near the Byzantine city walls; the fragrant **strawberries** grown in the Bosphorus village of Arnavutköy; and the cucumbers from Çengelköy, along the Asian side of the strait, and from Langa, now part of the gritty central-city Aksaray neighborhood.

As recently as 1900, historical sources indicate, Istanbul was home to more than 1,200 **market gardens** covering as many as 12 square kilometers. Today, most have been plowed under and paved over — and most of those that remain face the threat of a similar fate. But the wheels of urbanization and development that began churning vigorously in the 1970s and 1980s have more recently also spurred a grass-roots resurgence in urban food growing.

The Tarlataban garden in the Rümeli Hisari neighborhood was among the first in this new wave.

"When a Starbucks was opened at Boğazici University, there was a protest against the increasing food prices and commercialization on campus and some of us said, 'Let's see if we can grow our own food instead,'" garden volunteer Pınar



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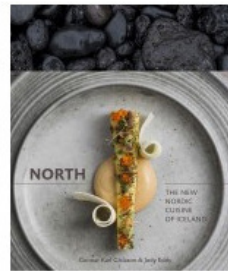
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Ercan recalls as she sits on a tarp picking chard seeds from a stack of dried stalks and gathering them in a jar. “We didn’t know if we could do it or not.”

Volunteers at the Tarlataban community garden. Credit: Jennifer Hattam

Three years later, the small plot of land on a woody, remote corner of the university campus supplies produce to a student-run collective kitchen and serves as a laboratory for seed saving, composting and other sustainability initiatives. From a distance, the growing area looks like a wild tangle of plants, but move in closer and bright purple eggplants, red tomatoes and green peppers emerge from their vines, while robust melon and squash flourish in the undergrowth. (Crop diversity and rotation are notable characteristics of traditional bostan, which typically yield 15 to 20 different types of produce a year.)

A small group of volunteers tends the Tarlataban garden each week using techniques derived from the environmentally friendly practice of permaculture. Learning as they go, they have recently been sharing the knowledge they have acquired with students from other local universities who want to start similar projects on their campuses.

Demonstrations spur urban gardening projects

Istanbul’s new urban-gardening movement got a dramatic boost last year, when **mass protests** broke out in response to the threatened destruction of a centrally located green space to make way for a shopping mall. During the week or so that demonstrators occupied **Gezi Park**, some of them planted a small **vegetable garden** along its northern edge. After the park was cleared by police, similar gardens began to pop up around the city.

“Many places were cultivated after Gezi — empty plots of land owned by city municipalities and often threatened by development,” Sopov says.

In the Cihangir neighborhood, a short walk from Gezi Park, the Roma Bostan sits on a vacant hillside with a million-dollar view of the city, next to a staircase often crowded with young beer drinkers and littered with the broken bottles they leave behind. A sign on the fence surrounding its cornstalks and cabbage heads reads: “In the summer of 2013, this area was cleared of garbage for the first time. The soil was treated, planting beds created, and vegetables and healing herbs planted from local seeds. ... It is kept alive by the collective effort of neighborhood residents. We await your support to keep it clean and protected. ...”

Across the water, on the Asian side of the city, residents of the Kadıköy district have rallied, so far successfully, to keep their postage-stamp-sized **Moda Gezi Bostan** from being covered with asphalt for a parking lot.

“It’s all totally free — people plant and take whatever they want,” says a local who ambles up to chat with a visitor.

Small in scale and tended by hobbyists, these community plots can’t make up for the destruction of the historical bostan whose gardeners passed down a lifetime of knowledge from one generation to the next and fed the city for so many years with the produce they grew to sell at **local markets**. But the Tarlataban garden’s Ercan and others hope they might just be able to point Istanbul in a new direction.

“We understood after Gezi that we can be an example,” she says. “We’re trying to make what we need for ourselves, and the garden is a way to show people a more sustainable model for living.”

Main photo: Piyale Paşa Bostan in Istanbul. Credit: Jennifer Hattam

Zester Daily contributor **Jennifer Hattam** is an independent journalist based in Istanbul. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic Cities*, *BBC Wildlife*, *California*, *IPS*, *Istanbul Eats*, *The National*, *Salon.com*, *Time Out Istanbul*, *Wired* and *Women’s eNews*. She also leads culinary tours in her adopted city and blogs about her experience at *The Turkish Life*.

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