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From grey to green. Transform your living room, garden, balcony, rooftop, bathroom or pavement garden into a lush oasis. Never long for greenery again.

I long for greenery. As a city dweller, isn't it ridiculous that I have to travel miles in order to fully immerse myself in nature? I mean the kind of landscape with trees that have trunks as big as houses, where nature rules over all. I love the city, but I long for more green in my everyday environment, and where I live is a concrete jungle instead of a real one. Greenery gives humans a boost, and helps us to recharge. So if greenery is so good for us, why are cities so grey?

Grey and green

I live in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, a city with metropolitan ambitions and around half a million souls who live, work, commute, exercise and play there every day. If you travel from north to south or from west to east, you start to notice a couple of things. The houses and flats are stacked up on top of each other like shoeboxes, and while there are trees, there's far more grey concrete than there is green space.

In the suburbs, the roads tend to be wider, the trees older and houses more imposing. You can stroll in a beautifully laid out park. One trip, one city, but a completely different world. A contrast between grey and green.

Green love

This got me thinking about the effects of greenery on humanity's physical and mental health. In Japan, they've practised forest bathing, known as *shinrin-yoku*, for centuries. And in more recent years, plants have grown hugely in popularity on social media, with many becoming proud 'plant parents'.

If greenery is so good for us, then why is the city so grey

Making greenery a priority

I believe that we should make it a priority to make our cities greener. So many people live in these densely packed environments that even small changes would benefit a lot of people. Our city spaces have the capacity to be greener, if you know where to start. I spoke to some experts to find out how.

Contribute a plant

Rotterdam has set its sights on becoming greener. Over the past four years, 21.5 hectares of greenery have been added to the city. That's the equivalent of 29 football pitches! As well as providing the benefit of making the inhabitants of this city happier and healthier, retroactively adding greenery to non-green spaces has the advantage of increasing biodiversity and helping to fight the climate crisis. While big problems with the climate, such as extreme weather and flooding, can feel overwhelming to deal with on a personal level, I'm fascinated to discover how my own little garden could contribute to solving such large issues.

My own little garden could contribute to solving such large issues

A symphony of grey

It was the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that spurred this thought process. A large proportion of the working population were suddenly working from home for months or even years, and the pressures were intense. People quit their jobs, or demanded better benefits. Urbanites moved en masse to the countryside or suburbs. For those who remained in the city, apartment walls began to close in, and many people realise that the immediate environment of their home city was pretty uninspiring. Parks are too small, or too far away, and strolls around the neighbourhood provided only a symphony of grey. Inside our homes didn't fare much better, with home improvement projects seeing a sudden rise in popularity. It was as though being confined within four walls awoke an enormous itch within us.

Dreaming of a simpler life

Self-sufficiency also moved higher up our agendas. Remember how supermarkets had stripped, bare shelves, how stranger's cars were stuffed with toilet paper and how your favourite local cafe had to keep

its doors shut for months? Our cravings didn't go away, however, so we learned how to make our own coffee and banana bread at home. This self-reliance awakened dreams of a simpler life, with more fresh air. More time for silly delights such as baking bread, feeding the chickens, walking on Hampstead Heath. Was that why we all fell in love with rural life?

This lifestyle was also massively romanticised by social media trends such as cottagecore. And who doesn't want to spend their time picnicking in fields and making floral wreaths? Some went beyond dreaming of this existence and instead made it their reality. On Netflix, the film *The biggest little farm* was discovered by a new audience some two years after it was shown in cinemas. Now that the world suddenly looked different, the call of nature became much, much stronger. Time passed, and slowly but surely the world reopened its doors. We once again became acquainted with the delights of taking our cappuccinos to go, and of cafe terraces packed people with savouring a cold glass of wine. It's hard to take the dream of a higher quality of life back, however. The green fire was lit beneath us.

Get to work with greenery, together with your government

The more research I do, the more I'm stunned by the big initiatives that my city and many other European

cities such as London, Paris and Berlin are participating in. These are global communities that help cities and governments develop a long-term plan relating to sustainability, liveability and a resilient future.

C40 is a network of mayors from 100 leading cities around the world who want to address the climate crisis. Mayor of London Sadiq Khan is the chair, and has the admirable task of creating a future in which everyone is able to thrive wherever they are. Cities earn their membership through action, meaning that

The pandemic unleashed an itch in urbanites. They no longer dreamt of capitalism, but of a richer life in the fresh air.

cities really have to walk the walk to be honoured with membership. London has been a member since 2005, and since joining has been working on a huge range of climate-related issues such as zero waste, green and healthy streets, renewable energy and nature in urban environments.

Another similar initiative is the Resilient Cities Network, a global network with the aim of creating urban resi-



We dream of the outdoors, and picnics in nature

lience. Making cities greener is high on their agenda. Councillor Chantal Zeegers, local party leader and chair of the D66 party group on the council, spoke to us about how she's implementing her plans for greening urban spaces. "After the local council elections in the Netherlands, you have four years to govern in coalition. You want to implement as many points from your manifesto as possible in that time, but it's also important that cities make longer term plans. The city council here has set the target of adding 32 hectares of greenery to our city by 2026, and that's building from the progress we made over the past four years, where we managed to add 20 hectares of greenery. These global communities offer innovation and inspiration with the associated long-term projects."

Another example of these types of projects is the progress London has made in recent years in creating living roofs and walls. In 2008, a London report was released on this phenomenon - walls and roofs which are covered in plants and grasses, an essential component of making a densely packed city greener. Green walls and roofs can also provide a habitat for wildlife and help to store stormwater, as well as increasing the amount of greenery in our everyday lives. This report increased the installation of green walls and green roofs throughout London, especially in areas of central London which have historically struggled with creating green spaces. A report on the same subject, released 10 years later, highlighted the success of the initiative as well as signposting great examples of the trend. While centralised schemes and grants for projects such as this can be available from the government and your local council, it's important to also get to work on greening initiatives yourself. This work is too important to wait for other people to do it for you.

Rewild the world

I make an appointment to meet Raymond Landegent, a serial entrepreneur and green businessman. Groenemorgen, the company he runs with his business partner Berend van Zanten, is working on the green city of tomorrow. In 2020, Landegent announced that he wanted to create 1,000 pavement gardens in just four months. The media picked up on the story resulting in a pavement garden mania. People stuck posters in their windows to call for more greenery. A record attempt was also made to create the longest pavement garden and seize the title from a rival city. This attention meant that a whopping 959

pavement gardens were created in those four months. Landegent says: "Every little bit helps, truly. If you don't know where to begin, start with a pavement garden. Lift a row of paving stones and stick in plants that grow anywhere. It's great fun to do on your own, with the kids or with friends or neighbours. It's infectious. And who isn't cheered up by a green street?" You can take this attitude with your own garden, driveway, balcony or terrace, or any other outdoor space you can get your hands on. Just make sure to check local regulations before you get started. The more people do activities such as this, the better, as it dramatically increases biodiversity.

Green proselytiser Landegent points to a tree a metre or two from the café terrace where we're drinking coffee. "Take this small area where this tree is planted," he says. "The tree has been surrounded with various different types of plants. Not only does this look beautiful, it does wonders for biodiversity!"

You lift a couple of paving stones from the street. And then what? How do you start to make things greener?

"A street with a neat row of the same trees is a good idea in principle, but it's not how nature works. Nature thrives on diversity. Truly wild gardens can seem scary, and go against our very human instinct to keep everything neatly inside the borders. But as David Attenborough says in his latest film, 'we need to re-wild the world'. It is precisely in the areas with a diversity of plants that insects are reappearing. Not just bees, but also important organisms that feed our soil."

London has another initiative for this exact topic, with an added focus on changing weather systems. With an increase in recent years of heavy rainfall and flash flooding, it's important to find solutions that help to redirect rainwater from the streets to the waterways



where it belongs. A London initiative called Grey to Green is designed to help and support and advise communities who want to run their own depaving projects.

Fear of failure with gardening

Humanity is distanced from nature nowadays, and our instinct can be to manage it like a project at work, keeping it in check, controlling it and cutting back untidy growth. Have we developed a fear of failure with gardening?

Working with plants is just as healing as visiting a psychologist - but more fun.

I pose this question to Floor Korte, who inspires people with her fabulous kitchen garden, by writing books, connecting with her community online and giving her audience the tools they need to get star-

ted with gardening in a stress-free way. "My kitchen garden adventure started in 2013 with a tomato plant that my sister gave me," Korte says. "I was allowed to plant it in my parents' garden. I had zero experience, but I got advice from my father. I realised that every time I visited I looked for my plant." The plant grew and so did Floor's kitchen garden, from a single plant to a 100m² kitchen garden with fruit, vegetables and herbs.

"Gardening has changed a lot for me," she says. "I gave up my job as an interior designer and devoted myself to it full-time. But I have also changed as a person and have become more conscious of what I eat, what I buy and how I live. Nothing beats the taste of a strawberry from your own garden, or the sight of an intrigued child studying scurrying insects."

It's clear to me that people are made incredibly happy by seeing greenery, but also by working with plants. Why not roll up your sleeves and plunge your hands into the soil? Judith van Lent from Studio May & June confirms this. "Gardening has a powerful healing effect," she says.

"I know a lot of stories of people who saw the light again after burnout or serious illness by repeatedly going out into the garden. Tending, planting and working with greenery has something meditative about it. I would go so far as to suggest that helping

something to grow is just as healing as visiting a psychologist - but more fun."

Van Lent started her company just before the pandemic and wants to steer people onto a greener path with her business. "If your budget is small, you can take a course with us, and if it's large we can design a fabulous year-round pick-your-own garden for you."

I notice that everyone I talk to is so laid back about greenery, seeing it as wild, diverse and there for the taking. My prejudice and possible fear of gardening has been proven unfounded, with no-one insisting on neat borders, tidy paths, calendars with planting times or any other rules. Greenery in the outdoor space mainly sounds fun, playful and free, with an emphasis on living with nature the way we used to as a species - especially without an ecological footprint.

Three dimensional thinking and design

Building façades, gardens, canopy covers and parks are definitely not the only places in the city where there are gains to be made with greenery. Don't forget balconies and riverbanks, vertical green walls, or shared neighbourhood spaces. The more research I do,

the greener my city becomes in my mind. My dreams range from ivy to begonias. I muse about rosebushes and old oak trees. I imagine a sea of colour in spring when the flowers emerge from the ground. I daydream about making soup with courgettes from my own garden, and of a fluttering butterfly alighting on my nose. And then all of a sudden, I realise that my thinking has been limited to my own perspective, and that I need to aim higher. Rooftop level, to be exact.

In urban areas, roofs cover a lot of square metres. I take a stroll with Esther Wienese, official roof diva and author of *Het Rotterdamse Dakenboek*, *The Rotterdam Roof Book*. Her mission is for every roof to be an oasis. "Cities are becoming increasingly full, dirty, hot and grey," she says. "Luckily, there is a solution for a beautiful, clean, sustainable and sociable city close at hand: up on the roof. You can create gardens and parks there, grow vegetables, reuse rainwater, capture the power of the sun, stargaze, live, work, meet up and retreat."

With a bit of creativity, some budget and determination, you can turn any roof into a green opportunity. Solar panels are one example, with rooftop panels



On the roof you can create gardens and parks, grow vegetables, reuse rainwater, catch the sun, stargaze, live, work, meet and retreat

delivering more return than panels in other locations, and making a significant difference to both the heating of your home and of your city. How great would it be to transform your roof into a place where you can be amidst greenery, invite friends for a barbecue, grow vegetables and fruit and flowers for picking? Whatever kind of greenery you can manage will lend nature a hand, and will make people smile - because greenery makes people happy.

Hundreds of square metres of green opportunities. They're there for the taking in the city, up on the roofs!

According to Wienese, the future of the healthy city is up on the roof. "It offers so many opportunities. The potential of this unused space is massive, and cities are increasingly recognising how valuable these square metres are." It's important to keep the right perspective, however, and to keep the future in mind. "We need to look beyond the front wall, the back garden and the roof," Wienese says. "The future for green living spaces and urban development is a three dimensional approach. For example, if you focus on making your back garden efficient at draining water with the help of permeable paving, your roof could contribute to the greenery around you by helping to cool your home, and providing a place to relax. And then your front garden could be about increasing biodiversity."

This year, I'm moving to a new development in my own neighbourhood in the heart of Rotterdam. It's a project in which sustainability plays an important role, with the back gardens of four streets forming a square making up a green oasis. I can't wait to get started on increasing the amount of greenery there and am planning what I'll do. A green roof is a must - it invites social cohesion, which is so important when you move to a new place. I'm going to call the Owners' Association to ask whether the solar panels on the roofs of the shared spaces could have greenery and moss

added around them. I'm going to investigate if subsidies are available to make my space even greener. And perhaps I'll lift some paving stones from the street. I can't wait!

If you can't wait to get stuck in, Thejoyofplants.co.uk offers inspiration and tips for getting to work straight away. Find out how to create a green front garden, how to hide a brick wall with green climbers or how to create an outdoor home workspace with plants. Take a look at our background articles about the positive effect of a green environment and the Shinrin-Yoku



About Moniek Kuipers

Moniek Kuipers (1986) is a content creator and photographer. She lives in Rotterdam with her husband and two sons, and soon will move to a house with more greenery.

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