

## *SOCIAL VEGETABLE GARDEN # 3: HEALTHY, FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND SUSTAINABLE HORTICULTURE IN NATURTEJO GEOPARK (PORTUGAL)*

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The Social and Health Action Office of the Municipality of Idanha-a-Nova has delivered a leaflet to the inhabitants of the parishes of Idanha-a-Nova, Ladoeiro and Zebreira in December 2011 promoting a Project called “Social Vegetable Gardens of Idanha-a-Nova”. That leaflet informed that the Municipality of Idanha-a-Nova would grant small lots of land with 100 m<sup>2</sup> of the *Couto da Várzea* Farm to those who wished to dedicate themselves to horticulture.

The *Couto da Várzea* Farm owns some of the most fertile lands of the *Beira Baixa* region and occupies an area of about 600 hectares in the plain of Idanha-a-Nova and it is crossed by the Ponsul River which flows near the foothill of the magnificent fault cliff of the Ponsul.

These Social Vegetable Gardens are located by the left bank of the Ponsul River which circumscribes them in the north. The place is most agreeable and relaxing because of the several species of dense trees such as poplars, willows, ashes and plane trees.

Many white storks build their nests in the poplars by the river (Fig. 1). While farming, one can hear the singing of the different bird species: nightingales, hoopoes, cuckoos, bee-eaters, magpies, goldfinches and sparrows. Moreover, one has a privileged sight of the scarp of the Ponsul’s Fault.

In March 2012 the 9 applicants to this Project were summoned for a meeting and the general regulation of the “Social Vegetable Gardens” was presented. Then the previously numbered lots of land with around 300 m<sup>2</sup> each were delivered by application order.

The municipality was in charge of plowing the land and installing several free of charge water points. Later other improvements were made such as the setting of a gate and the donation of the organic fertilizer, cow manure.

The vegetable gardens were cultivated at the beginning of April and at the end of June 2012, 13 small lots were effectively being cultivated.

This Project aims at contributing for the education for sustainability, good farming practices and for the implementation of the organic farming, encouraging the use of the land, the return to the rural world and the preservation and knowledge of nature.

In a planet where consumerism is ruling a change in people’s habits and lifestyle is needed and this is a small contribution so that people start producing their own food. This way they can save money and eat healthy food produced without chemical pesticides and fertilizers which cause many of today’s diseases. On the other hand, it is also a contribution for the maintenance of biodiversity, water and air and soil quality.

The food from these vegetable gardens is for family consumption or donated to friends and neighbours and the remainder products may be delivered at the Social Bank of Clothes and Goods of the municipality of Idanha-a-Nova.

As participants of the Project “Social Vegetable Gardens of Idanha” with land lot number 3 (Fig. 2.) the authors can share their experience and conclude that it is possible to produce tasty, sweet, healthy and good quality food using only biological farming methods.

Between April and June 2012 the authors have experimented growing potato, cucumber, lettuce, kale, tomato, courgette, chickpea, corn, eggplant, beetroot, cauliflower, cabbage, savoy cabbage,

runner beans, pumpkin, onion, carrot, pepper, broccoli, watermelon, strawberry and melon. Until now the most successful were the courgettes, the runner beans, the cucumbers and the watermelon.

The authors used cow and sheep manure as an organic fertilizer, natural pesticides made of an infusion of nettles in water to eliminate the lice which attacked the eggplants and French marigold were planted to repel plagues. No chemical fertilizer, pesticide or herbicides were used at all.

The quality and quantity of the vegetables already grown are exceeding all expectations, so the contract for the occupation of the Social Vegetable Garden is expected to be renewed next year. Throughout this experience one were able to verify that there was an increase of vegetable consumption per meal and there was also an increase of the number of vegetarian meals.

This Project is an important action which can be perfectly framed in the spirit of the celebration of “2014 – International Year of Family Farming” declared by the UN.



Fig. 1. Storks build their nests in the poplars by the river.



Fig.2. The Social Vegetal Garden number 3.