



GARDENS OF HOPE

Far from being temporary, refugee camps can provide accommodation for displaced people for many years. Gardens bring stability, beauty and dignity

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If proof were needed that gardening is much more than just labour, then the stories emerging from a remote area of northern Iraq make a powerful case. Domiz is a windswept refugee camp in the plains of Kurdistan. Intermittent water and electricity supplies to more than 5,000 shelters provide a home, of sorts, to around 26,000 refugees many of them women and children, most forced out of neighbouring Syria by the brutal seven-year civil war. But for the past two years Domiz has been the seedbed of a small but important project to create gardens among the makeshift houses, tended by people who have lost almost everything. It's co-ordinated and developed by the Lemon Tree Trust, a UK-based Community Interest Company (CIC) that began working in the camp in 2015 after seeing people creating their own patches of garden among the ugly sprawl of concrete, steel and flapping tarpaulins. It began in the simplest way possible, a modest competition to celebrate Domiz's best garden, and has developed into a lifeline providing food, work and hope for hundreds of migrant families.

One of the people behind the Trust is Dr Mikey Tomkins, an artist and urban food specialist, whose 2014 PhD in urban agriculture entitled 'Making Space for Food' led him to map empty spaces in cities including London and Newcastle that could be used for growing food. "Growing nutritious crops requires little investment and can be done on even the smallest plots of land with even limited growing periods. It also can draw from traditional knowledge, skills, local resources and seeds and provides an opportunity to recover and reuse organic solid waste and waste water," he explains. His

research in the UK led him to a collaborative project with the Hunt Institute for Engineering & Humanity, a humanitarian group based in Dallas, establishing community gardens in disadvantaged areas helping refugees to grow their own food. He saw first-hand how urban agriculture gave people with almost nothing an investment in their future. Meanwhile at Coventry University, another academic, Dr Andrew Adam-Bradford, was also exploring how urban agriculture could help support forced migrants. "He had extensive experience in refugee camps," says Dr Tomkins. "And knew that the Kurdish government were open to discussions so he suggested to me that we should visit Domiz Refugee Camp."

The camp was established in 2012 in the wake of the vast humanitarian refugee crisis in Syria. By 2015 small gardens had sprung up around many shelters growing flowers, fruit, vegetables and herbs, often the only link people had with their homeland. Many come from a farming background, and because fresh food in the camp is very expensive, some began to establish small growing areas to become self-sufficient. "Refugees are only allowed to earn \$20 a day in cash-for-work aid programmes so the economy of the camp isn't skewed, but this often leads to systematic poverty," says Dr Tomkins, who recognised a practical and emotional need for gardens. In 2015, the Trust distributed 500 lemon trees to migrants, followed the next year by a garden competition in the camp, which has become an annual event attracting hundreds of entries. In 2017 work began on the Azadi (or Liberation) Garden in a unused area of the camp, a place that now resembles a community allotment ▷

Left At the centre of the camp is a fenced-off communal area that the refugees have named the Azadi (Liberation) Garden. The whole community came together in 2017 to build raised beds for the area, with each family allocated a bed for their own use. Many have also created gardens of their own, growing everything from fragrant roses to onions and fresh herbs, or one of the 500 lemon trees distributed in 2015.

YOU TRY TO REMEMBER SOMETHING FROM YOUR LIFE IN SYRIA... THE SAME PLANTS AND FLOWERS... SO YOU FEEL AT HOME AND COMFORTABLE

▷ with raised beds, polytunnels, a small nursery and a borehole for water. With so much unemployment and so many skills the work was all able to be carried out by the refugees. One worker, a woman called Avene, speaks of the number of very traumatised women and children who live in the camp who need help and support. “In the garden we’ve built a special section for them so they can benefit from plants, vegetables and flowers and either sell the surplus or share them with neighbours. It helps strengthen community ties.”

Their experiences are both hauntingly personal and recognisably universal. Khaled, aged 44, recalls arriving in Domiz. “We were hugely surprised when we arrived in the camp. It was like being given an electric shock. There was no tent for us. Some days all we had to eat were crackers and biscuits. Then I decided I’m going to create something beautiful here.” In his small, breeze-block compound he planted scented pelargoniums, lemon verbena, roses and herbs in anything he could use as a container. “The camp is closed like a shell, but in my garden I feel like I’m in my kingdom. And when I’ve finished gardening I feel like I have the world in my hand.”

Others say the gardens clean the air (important when the sewers are often open and the rubbish collections intermittent) and the sight of fresh, green growth in the barren camp gives people hope. One woman, who lost her husband during the civil war, created her flower-filled garden with her 11-year-old daughter. The honeysuckle around her door perfumes the air for her neighbours in the evening, and she shares the mint and lettuce she grows there, as well as opening up the compound gate so others can see its beauty. “It’s my life,” she says simply.

In 2011 Avine Ismail was living with her husband and three young children in Damascus, a neighbourhood abundant with

fruit, vegetables and flowers. Following the demonstrations for freedom, the Syrian army began attacking civilians, so Avine and her family fled for their lives to Iraq, eventually ending up in Domiz. With her husband away fighting in the Kurdish military forces, and her youngest daughter suffering from a severe heart complaint, growing flowers and food has helped her cope by giving her a positive memory of city to which she can never return. “In this camp, being so far away, you try to remember something from your life in Syria. You try to find the same seeds of plants and flowers... so you feel at home and comfortable for a while.” The words ‘hope’ and ‘beauty’ come up so often, it’s evident that these modest gardens provide a sanctuary unavailable anywhere else in their lives.

The Lemon Tree Trust is now extending its work to providing Crisis Response Garden Kits, ranging in size from a family garden to a large community project, providing seeds and tools so that newly arrived refugees can start growing food immediately. To date 1,200 kits have been designed and assembled in Domiz by a workers’ co-operative made up of refugees, with funding from cosmetics company LUSH and distributed by an Iraqi NGO, Mercy Hands.

The last word goes to Nohad Kalash, aged 36, who with his wife and five young children has created a garden of touching beauty. “When we arrived in the camp it was cold and snowing. The children were crying from the cold. We had nothing. I grew up surrounded by green. Without green the world is meaningless. Where there’s green, there’s happiness.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

The Lemon Tree Trust is sponsoring a garden at this year’s RHS Chelsea Flower Show designed by Tom Massey. For details on the Trust and its partner organisations visit lemontreetrust.org

Right Throughout the camp residents have created individual gardens using any spare land or containers they can lay their hands on. The Trust is also now employing a workers’ co-operative (second from bottom right) based in the camp to design and assemble Crisis Response Garden Kits containing tools and seeds to help newly arrived refugee families. For Khaled (bottom right), spending time in his garden lets him feel “like I’m in my kingdom”.



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