

Greening Cairo's roofs with nutritious vegetables and fruits



With 22 million inhabitants, Cairo is by far the most populous, most crowded and most polluted city in the Middle East.

"Turning Cairo's roofs into gardens is unique and expected to expand to other cities" says Osama El Beheiri, one of the founders of this agricultural innovation called "Rooftop Gardening". This project helps people produce their own organic vegetables, get an income or simply fulfil leisure time.

In a suburb area of Heliopolis, about 15 km from Cairo, Latif plants eggplant, spinach, cabbage, oranges, mandarins, parsley, dill, lettuce, tomato and, occasionally, cucumbers. He 'employs' two scarecrows dressed in traditional Egyptian attire to keep away raptors and other birds that come to steal his prized vegetables.

Once the plants have matured, Latif gathers small bunches of herbs and his fruits and vegetables which he proudly sells on a small stand in front of the building to residents and passersby who have been his friends for years.

The idea of growing food on Cairo's roofs began a few years ago because of a problem. People in the suburbs were not eating enough healthy fruits and vegetables and their diets were pretty poor in nutrients. And so the Egyptian government launched a programme encouraging roof gardening to get people to grow and eat their own food (fruits and vegetables) improving their diets.

The programme was specially designed for poor families in the suburbs of Cairo and Alexandria. The objective was not only to facilitate production and consumption of fresh vegetables but also to ensure a stable income for families and women who quickly and enthusiastically adopted the method

FAO has supported rooftop gardening,



training 48 families in the use of hydroponics systems and other techniques to grow fruits and vegetables on their roofs. Through the project families also learnt the "green productions," techniques decreasing or eliminating the use of pesticides.

Since then, the project has become an urban and peri-urban horticulture model. Many families have started using unusual containers to grow vegetables and herbs - water tanks, tables even truck tires. People grow many varieties of herbs, citrus, fruits and vegetables and with a smart system for irrigation, made up of pipes and tanks - these men and mostly women gardeners are greening the roofs of their suburb.

Fatima, one of Latif's friends, has been growing her roof garden for years and knows all the secrets to doing it successfully. This 76 year old woman with a big heart, has such vast knowledge of growing vegetables and herbs, she now voluntarily provides agricultural advice to new 'roof farmers and growers'.

Other Residents of this populated suburb of Cairo have quickly realized the additional benefits of roof gardening - access to healthy and seasonal



food using a minimum of fertilizers, but also the environmental benefit - fresher air to breathe in a very polluted city and potentially cooler climates, as these roof gardens can decrease temperatures by 8 to 10 degrees.

These roofs and terraces have also become venues for relaxing with friends and neighbors who love to be surrounded by all the greenery.

But most of all the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation so happy at the results obtained is considering implement the programme in other Egyptian cities.

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