Bringing private actors into action. The garden complex in Flanders

Valerie Dewaelheyns and Elke Rogge, Institute of Agricultural and Fisheries Research, Belgium

Domestic gardens remain one of the least studied and understood land uses. They are such a common and trivial part of people’s everyday experience that they escape attention, from the academic world as well as from policy. Not only the smallness of many gardens, but also their modest and private character, large number of owners and managers and extreme diversity are obstacles for research and policy. Yet, a substantial fraction of the open space both in (peri-) urban as residential areas is covered by domestic gardens. Although individually they may look insignificant, the sum of domestic gardens for a certain area might be significant.

Given their spatial footprint, it is time to put the domestic garden in a different perspective. Despite their diversity and heterogeneity, domestic gardens have essential characteristics that invites to consider them as strategic land use units. Existing literature provides substantial information on ecological, social and economic characteristics, functions and services of domestic gardens. So, domestic gardens indeed seem to have strategic potential when thinking about future challenges and common goals like climate change and food security.

By means of a qualitative research design we were able to get a thorough insight into the barriers and levers for private garden owners to adjust their garden design and management for the common good. By combining expert interviews, a design workshop addressing garden and landscape architects as well as urbanist, and focus groups inquiring private garden owners, we were able to grasp the perceptions of all relevant actors with regards to the potential of mobilizing domestic gardens as a strategic land use. All three data sources were coded in Nvivo software. The insights were related to existing literature and captured in a theoretical scheme. The gained understandings are essential in unraveling the logics of domestic gardens.