



UGAIN

Urban **G**Ardens for the social
INtegration of migrants

Garden:

**“Das Beet ist voll” – interkultureller
Gemeinschaftsgarten**



Internet links

- ✓ <https://www.facebook.com/zwirnschmalz>
- ✓ <https://www.kulturvernetzung.at/de/zwirnschmalz>
- ✓ <https://www.instagram.com/zwirnschmalz/?hl=de>

1. Introduction

This garden is located in a small city in the northeast of Austria. It has 800m² and 10-15 gardeners. The founders wanted to give the, “new locals” (=migrants) a chance to get in contact with “old locals” (=people who live in the city since a long time) as well as meaningful activities, which provide them with food. The garden is combined with a sewing room and a center for redistribution, where things are shared for reusing, recycling and upcycling. All these 3 areas are managed by the same association “Zwirnschmalz”, and the same 3-5 strongly engaged people who volunteer their time. “New and old locals” contribute either in the garden, the sewing, or in both and some even in the management. The migrants are mainly young men and a family, from Afghanistan. The concept of “Zwirnschmalz” tries to close cycles: resources are spared where it’s possible, things which people don’t need any more are reused and sustainability is of high value.



The main advice and lessons learned from this case study are:

- The easiest thing is finding an activity where no special skills/language are important, so that it is simple and not exclusive.*
- Try to lay down our western arrogance and accept that not every migrant wants to receive help or to participate. Not everybody has to like the project. Respect other cultures and thoughts and try to share core values on how to treat each other.*
- Manual work can be a good way for some people to distract themselves from traumatic experiences.*

-If you don't get political support, search for support in the society: many people are willing to help and happy if they can contribute. Always use your gut feeling and keep on doing such projects even if Europe's policy is shifting towards a less welcoming culture. If you are passionate your project can contribute something valuable.

"Through this project people from the city will know who of us is reliable, friendly and motivated. That opens chances for better inclusion and further jobs. "

Migrant quote

"It was good that we didn't do too much planning and structuring. Just listen to your intuition and common sense. Also respect and accept the ideas and plans of the migrants from beginning using a bottom up approach."

Organisers quote

2. Garden data

Location - coordinates: Pater Helde Straße 11; 2130 Mistelbach, Austria

Coordinates:

48°34'19.9"N 16°33'52.6"E

48.572205, 16.564598

Garden description: A group of private volunteers had the idea of an intercultural community garden as it was clear, that refugees are going to come and stay in the city of Mistelbach. They wanted to enable inclusion into society and open a useful activity for this group of people. They presented the idea to the migrants where they lived and found some motivated people. The association named "Zwirnschmalz" was founded. The garden area, a small (800m²) private garden property in a settled area, is given to the group for free. The whole community garden is managed as common and there are no "private" plots. About 10 migrants and 5 Austrians spend time there regularly. The main plants are vegetables (especially tomatoes), "Gandana" (a typical plant from Afghanistan) and some fruit trees.

Infrastructure: Water, barbecue, a communal area and an office-caravan, composting area, gardening tools, private cars and storage rooms.

As it turned out many migrants are talented sewers. Sewing activities alongside selling of upcycled products were started by the same people. Herbs and flowers are used for filling pillows, which is building a connection between gardening and sewing. The project is financed by donations of resources (seeds, plants, tools, fabric, things inhabitants don't need anymore,...) and income through the selling of sewed products. Nobody is paid, everybody contributes because of their interest and passion.

3. Social integration and empowerment of migrants



Details of the initiative: The main aim of the organisers to start this project was to get to know the people who will be living in the city with them. To make the “fear” of the local Austrians redundant of all the new “strangers” and **connecting both groups was important**. Migrants should have a **useful activity** where they could grow their own healthy food, to save money in the long term. Because of the interest to sew and to garden together, mainly **two women** started the whole project, **without any** financial or governmental **support**. Some migrants were interested and many supportive people donated seeds, plants and tools because they wanted to contribute. Soon a field for gardening got leased to the group for free by a supporting woman. Everything was shared and treated as common goods – no private plots exist. The work and the yields are shared in a fair way amongst those who are participating.

The two women who started the initiative and some more helpers **developed a real friendship** with the migrants and wanted to care for them and **ensure a good start in this new country**. They also started to run German classes for free, informally helping out with legal questions and helping them to find accommodation. Furthermore, they included the migrants in the open **sewing sessions at their homes**. These sessions are open for everybody who is interested. **Upcycling products** are created together.

Many people wanted to support this project with **donations**, useful for the garden, like plants and tools, or the sewing, like fabrics and old clothes. They were happy to donate things they don't need anymore, which would be too good to throw away. These donated items are used in the garden, the sewing activities or are distributed among the migrants. As the amount of donations has risen, they started the **“center for redistribution”**. Because of this, **very little money is needed** for maintaining the project. They try to not buy anything additional and **use what they get**. There are also no cooperation partners, like the local government or local associations. Only some informal support was received now and then (plowing of garden area, plant donations from farmers,...).

With the **selling of sewed products, migrants** can get indirectly **rewarded** (=without financial payment) for the time and passion they bring into the project. From time to time there are events where their products are exhibited and sold at typical markets like the Christmas market of the city. In Austria non-profit associations are only allowed to sell small amounts of products without making a profit in the long run. Money has to be reinvested into the association to reach its goals. Therefore bills for train tickets, German classes, school materials and further education and other **useful expenses, are covered** with this money by the association **for the migrants**.

The founders and the most interested migrant gardener are managing the project **without hierarchy**. They are responsible for the communication, translation and planning of next steps but they are also gardening and sewing together with all the others.

The way to **success** from the organisers view was:

- Simple meditative work, where no talent and not much language is needed

- Community – a feeling of belonging
- Effort and passion of volunteers – no special training needed
- Emphasis on the need to participate
- Fun

Migrants are continuously contributing because they have developed a **feeling of belonging** to that group and they have a lot of spare time, as they are not allowed to work in Austria by law, until they get an officially accepted refugee status.

Lessons learned from migrants / advice to other migrants:

- Be curious and open to try such initiatives/possibilities
- Learn the local language.

Opportunities: One main opportunity for all gardeners is to learn from each other. This can be things like gardening techniques (lowered patches), values, language and cultures can be quite different. To be able to understand each other it is important to be open to new ways of thinking and ideas.

The project organisers wanted to create a space where people, who like each other could meet. Friendship and strong relations are a key factor for strong group dynamics.

The empowerment of refugees is seen as a big opportunity. Self-confidence is learned and the experience of national values happens automatically as meeting Austrians happens regularly. The open garden model (no fence) helps in this case. The migrants inform neighbors about their project and interested people stop by, have a look around the garden and start conversations.

An opportunity for the future could be seen in the selling of garden products at the local market every week. The gardening knowledge of the migrants is a chance for Austrians to learn how to grow and cook and eat new vegetables.

Threats/Challenges: There also some challenges and threats which exist in this project. The main thing is insecurity, because it is not sure if anybody from the migrant members of the project is allowed to stay in Austria, due to missing status and long negotiation duration. It could be the case, that the migrants don't get refugee status and have to leave the country.

Searching for jobs is not possible and makes mid- to long-term planning difficult. The organisers have to make sure to not disadvantage migrants in the end by giving them "work" It could be determined they are illegally working there without having permission which would cause troubles.

The poor support from local government is a barrier and an advantage at the same time, because of the missing financial and structural support on the one side and the full independence at the other side. The organisers sometimes struggle with the uncertainty of whether the project is helpful/fulfilling the needs for the migrants in the end of the day. "Is it more bad than good? Do we build up wrong hopes?" are thoughts from time to time. They also can't help the migrants regarding legal expertise because of a lack of knowledge in this field.

In general the right-wing shift and anti-welcoming policy in national and international politics over the last 2 years is disillusioning. Every new development leads to the question: "Why are we doing this, if there is so little interest in supporting migrants from the national politics?" The answer always is: "Because it just feels right for us und without doing this, it would feel even worse."

General considerations: The peculiarity of the project is to reuse things and donations in a sympathetic way so that migrants and Austrians get to know each other, build a community and have

fun. Having very engaged people and their contribution and passion is the key. They are closing the cycle by giving back advantages and empowerment to the migrants through financing further education or by selling products they made. The success is the feeling of belonging. People get new friends and are doing a lot of activities together, outside the project as well.

Today a lot of people in the city recognise and know the migrants from the project, as they are seen in the garden or in the streets. The shyness and clumsiness on both sides has reduced and many "fears" of Austrians for the 'unknown refugees' have disappeared. The project gives the possibility for migrants to learn about the behaviour and values of the "old locals". Also some practical skills (gardening, constructing, sewing, cooking, selling products,...) can be practiced. It is more about informal training and learning. The main chance is to build up a network of contacts, who often can provide other kinds of help in daily life and maybe even offer jobs for future. Lessons learned see below.

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