



ORTI DI VIA PADOVA

Community urban garden with 120 volunteers

Overview

Orti di Via Padova is a 2,300 m² shared urban garden in Milan's Zone 2 (Crescenzago neighborhood), managed by the Circolo Rete Ambiente of Legambiente Lombardia. It transforms a former illegal landfill and car park into a vibrant green space for collective horticulture, fostering social inclusion, environmental education, and biodiversity. The garden features vegetable plots, flower areas, composting, lombricoltura (earthworm farming), beehives for solitary bees, and a hydroponic system in collaboration with the University of Milano-Bicocca. Open to the public, it attracts about 20 weekly visitors (mostly retirees from the multicultural neighborhood) for gardening, knowledge sharing, and events like spring wood-burning rituals or pumpkin weight-guessing fundraisers. It promotes sustainable practices, zero-waste, and community bonding in a deprived, traffic-heavy area, aligning with broader urban greening efforts.

History and Inspiration

Initiated in the early 2010s by Legambiente, a national environmental network with over 100 units, the project reclaimed a degraded 2,300 m² site in via Esterle (near via Padova) that was an abandoned car park turned illegal dump. Pioneering efforts from 2014–2016 involved informal water access and basic tools borrowed from friends, evolving with municipal support for fencing, water connection, and a portable toilet. Inspired by environmental protection, social cohesion in multicultural peripheries, and sustainable urban agriculture, it drew from consultations with Expo 2015 experts and collaborations with schools and the Agricultural University of Milan. Fondazione Cariplo provided key funding (€60,000 for infrastructure). Starting with 3–5 volunteers, it grew to 120 by 2025, overcoming post-COVID collaboration dips through training. It embodies Legambiente's mission for green recovery and community resilience against urban decay.

How It Operates

The garden operates as a shared, volunteer-driven space open Monday–Saturday 9:30–12:00 and 14:30–18:00, Sunday 9:30–12:00. People join via word-of-mouth, Facebook (4,455 likes, 400 group members as of autumn 2025), or events, working in shifts or small groups (post-COVID adjustment) for planting, maintenance, and harvesting. No formal membership is required beyond Legambiente's €20 annual fee for insurance. Activities include hydroponic experiments with the University, bee monitoring with Milano-Bicocca, composting, and educational programs with schools (e.g., funding for tools like lawnmowers). Produce is shared among participants, with sales of items like honey or pastries. It emphasizes knowledge exchange, sustainability (e.g., no permissions needed for initial experiments), and social integration in a diverse area, hosting aperitivi (happy hours) and seasonal events, though some were halted by regulations.

Costs

Costs include annual insurance from an ethical bank (€900 for people and equipment, higher for dangerous tools), volunteer training (€1,000 in 2024 for post-COVID collaboration and renewing of activities), seeds, soil, fertilizers, and tools (e.g., lawnmower funded via school agreements). Electricity is minimal (~€100/year from renewables), while maintenance like toilet servicing is covered by the cooperative. Infrastructure (wood, irrigation, containers, shed) was €60,000 initially, but ongoing repairs add up. In 2024, a €1,700 debt highlighted financial strains from events and operations. No major salaries, as it's volunteer-based, but organizational challenges like matching volunteers increase indirect costs.

Funding Sources

Primary funding from Fondazione Cariplo (€60,000 for infrastructure like irrigation and sheds). Municipality covers water and some basics (fence, toilet). Agreements with schools provide tools (e.g., lawnmower). No national grants; self-sustaining via events and memberships. Partnerships with universities (Milano-Bicocca, Agricultural University) offer in-kind support for projects like hydroponics and bee studies. Occasional Expo consultations aided early development. No regular grants applied for, focusing on replication through models rather than funding ties.

Revenue Generation

Revenue from Legambiente membership (€20/year), product sales (honey €5/jar, pumpkin pastries), and creative events (pumpkin weight-guessing, aperitivi—though halted by regulations). Burning wood rituals attracted 500 people for fundraising but stopped due to pollution concerns. Self-sustaining model without profit focus; surplus reinvested into maintenance and training. No major income streams, emphasizing community over commercialization

Cost categories

Assets	Operational costs	Personnel costs	Administration and management
Land	Water (covered by municipality)	Volunteer training	Event organization
Infrastructure (wood, irrigation system, containers, shed)	Electricity	Trainer fees (external experts for group work)	Fundraising activities
Tools and equipment (lawnmower)	Maintenance (toilet servicing, repairs)		Insurance management
Hydroponic system	Seeds, soil, fertilizers		Social media management
Beehives and composting areas	Insurance		