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A food lover's guide to London
Food

Edward Platt

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Edible Hackney

More and more people are finding imaginative places for growing food in urban environments. Edward Platt reports



Growing food on Whiston Road, Hackney. Photograph: Mikey Tomkins

"I'm always amazed by the way that professional planning fails people," Mikey Tomkins says, as we stand beneath a 17 storey block of flats called Welshpool House, near Hackney's Broadway Market. Even on a bright, sunny afternoon in August, the area is not particularly inviting: people have congregated around a bench on the far side of the road, but the concrete terrace beneath the building and the three adjoining areas of fenced-off grass, are empty.

Tomkins, who is an expert on urban agriculture and a bee-keeper with hives on the roof of a nearby building, is incensed by the sight of so much wasted space. Last year, he produced a map called **Edible Hackney**, which imagines how the streets and estates of a small area of E8 could be turned to food production. He drew beehives on the roof of the 17-storey building and placed raised beds of vegetables and fruit trees around its base. The garages on the far side of the road became mushroom farms, and London Fields was the venue for an annual festival of local produce.

The map offers a beguiling vision of a district recently ravaged by riots, and yet it isn't entirely wishful thinking. When Tomkins had greeted our small group half an hour before with a pot of his London Fields honey, he had explained that the tour we were about to embark on would not only take in the places where food might be produced, but the places where it was already in production.

Our first stop was a garden that Tomkins described as an oasis, at the back of a low-rise block of flats on the Warburton and Darcy Estate, between Mare Street and London Fields. It is overlooked on three sides by windows, but sunflowers the size of the satellite dishes bloom in the flowerbeds around its edges, and elsewhere, there are beans, tomatoes, spinach, artichokes, potatoes, and a wide variety of herbs. Weeks before, the plum trees beside the gate had been dripping fruit.



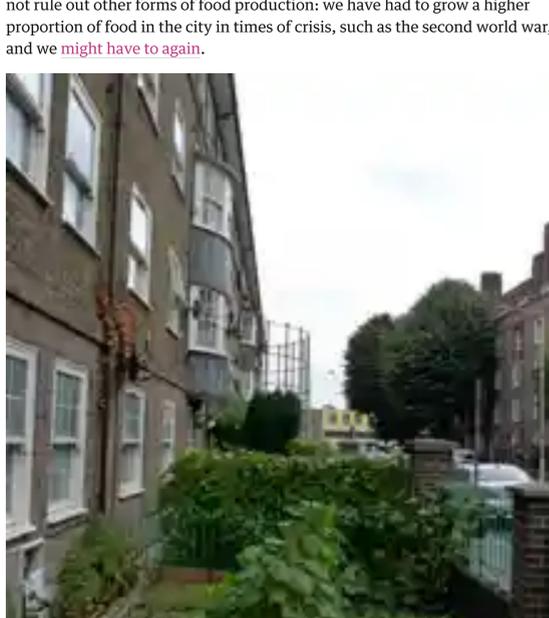
A vegetable patch off Teale Street, Hackney. Photograph: Mikey Tomkins

Elsewhere, residents of Hackney's estates have attempted to gain control of their environment by making what Tomkins called "incremental changes" to the places they live. There are runner beans and green beans entwined in the railings on the edges of Pritchard's Road, and beds of vegetables have been planted in the narrow strip of earth beneath the windows of the ground-floor flats. Tomkins pointed out that there was no easy access to the land - the gardens fringing the estate were apparently only meant for show, but the residents had colonised the land, and the council had tolerated their initiative by mowing around the edges of the expanding plots. Other people had created ever more elaborate miniature gardens - the luxuriant fronds of a pumpkin called a dodi had grown so thickly around a frame beside the front door of a flat on Teale Street that it formed a shady veranda.

Such sights are becoming increasingly common in Hackney, and elsewhere in British cities. Urban agriculture - also known as "food gardening" - is becoming an increasingly popular way of addressing rising food prices, and providing an alternative to industrialised methods of food production. The Capital Growth campaign, which aims to provide support for 2,012 new food growing "spaces" in London by the end of 2012, is more than halfway to its total. Londoners have even begun producing their own wine - the **Urban Wine Company** enlists the help of dozens of local growers, who deliver grapes in exchange for bottles of the finished product, and Tomkins had pointed out a heavily laden vine spilling over a south-facing wall in the centre of an estate called Orwell Court.

In total, Tomkins has counted 26 different kinds of fruit and vegetable within the area defined by his map, though he doesn't claim that it's possible, or desirable, for Hackney's residents to become entirely self-sufficient. "You'd still want some trade for cereals, staples, long-season crops," he says: "The instant, short-season crop are the ones you'd want to do here, which might, in the end, be only 15% of your diet. But it's the really energy-intensive stuff."

The Hackney-based collective, **Growing Communities**, who produce veg boxes from Hackney-grown produce, is a perfect example of the practice that Tomkins would like to encourage, for it specialises in the kind of salads and leafy greens that are best produced "close to market". And yet Tomkins does not rule out other forms of food production: we have had to grow a higher proportion of food in the city in times of crisis, such as the second world war, and we **might have to again**.



Vegetable gardens, Teale Street, Hackney. Photograph: Mikey Tomkins

What's more, granting locals residents an interest in food production is a way of combating the alienation that inspired the riots, and as we walked through London Fields, Tomkins indicated the people sitting on low mounds in the southern end of the park, and began to fantasise again: "This would be a lovely area for dwarf apple trees," he said. Since each tree produces 40 kilos of fruit, 20 trees would produce a harvest of 800kg: "It wouldn't feed many people, but it would be quite fun," Tomkins says. "And besides, why not?"

More and more people are asking the same question. In Dalston, an enterprising design partnership has set up a project called Farm: Shop which, as the name implies, is an attempt to turn a shop into a farm; and elsewhere, there are many less ambitious scenes that encourage public participation. Two people on the walk worked in a building with a rooftop garden called the Dalston Roof Park, which has a bar surrounded by beds of vegetables and flowers - its organisers are offering live music events and film screenings, while hoping to encourage "young people from the local community to engage in the management of the garden" and its produce. The Capital Growth campaign runs training courses at the Allotment Garden in Regent's Park, and provides "Edible Estates" walking tours, which take in such sites as the Strawberry Fields Urban Orchards and the Rocky Park Urban Growers - other collectives who are orcharding Mikey Tomkin's aim of greening the city, and correcting the failures of professional planners.

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