



## Digging into Sweden's "Kolonilotter" Gardens

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At the dawn of the 20th century, intellectuals, politicians and social justice groups were concerned about the impact of the industrial revolution on the human spirit. Tenement housing, deplorable urban environments and oppressive working hours and conditions prevented people from communing with nature as their parents and grandparents had. This lack of fresh air, fresh food and exercise was seen as one of the main causes of illness and depression among the working poor.

In my (adopted) hometown of Chicago, great minds like Fredrick Olmstead and Jens Jensen were taking action by designing the Chicago park system (at that time three separate park systems) that would provide beauty and outdoor activity for the growing industrial city. The park motto "Hortus in Urbs - Garden in a City" - is a play on the Chicago motto "Urbs in Hortus" "City in a Garden" and reflects the passion a young Chicago had for landscape architecture and beautiful outdoor spaces.

Gardening in Chicago wasn't all about beauty however, the famous landscape architect Jens Jensen, in the first decade of the 20th century, designed allotment gardens into each park he created because he was concerned that urban children, in addition to not getting enough outdoor time, didn't understand where their food supply came from.

These sympathies and concerns were echoed in Europe as well. Dr. Daniel Schreber, a physician from Leipzig, Germany, created what became known as Schrebergärten - small gardening communities where working children could spend their few leisure hours growing food and communing with nature.

The idea became so wildly popular - with adults as well as children - that soon other countries adopted the practice. Denmark was the first Scandinavian country to develop similar garden communities. In 1904, Sweden built the first "kolonilotter" (colony of lots or, simply "allotments") and these garden communities quickly became a cherished part of working class culture. They were practical too as they allowed city dwellers to raise their own fruits and vegetables and, in some cases, poultry and small livestock.



During both world wars, the extensive network of

kolonilotter became vital to supplement diminished food supplies during the conflicts and they've remained popular ever since.

Today, there are 25,000 of these allotment gardens in Sweden with a large number located within the confines of Stockholm and other densely populated urban centers. In some areas, the waiting list to get a kolonilotter can be upwards of twenty years and approximately 300 associations have sprung up for the management and maintenance of these garden communities.

I first learned of the KLs (as we call them) when, as a newlywed, my new husband, Peter, took me to Stockholm to meet his family. Our first trip included a visit to [Skansen](#) [1] - a living history museum founded in 1891 by

an industrialist who was concerned that Swedish rural culture would be crushed in the gears of the Industrial Revolution. The museum has numerous buildings from various regions in Sweden collected and protected to remind Swedes of their cultural heritage. Among this collection are two kolonilotter.

Being a lifelong edible gardener, I fell in love with these little houses immediately. On subsequent visits, Skansen was the must see ? I had to visit ?my? little garden houses.

After many years of marriage, and many trips to Skansen, my husband went to visit family an extra week before I arrived for our annual visit. During that time he sent me photos of various friends and activities including an area near his mother?s house known as ?Tantolunden?? one of the largest kolonilotter communities in the country.

Aside from the minor marital skirmish that erupted from him ?keeping Tantolunden from me all these years!!!? (he claimed ignorance) we spent that trip exploring the more than 270 KL?s in the heart of Stockholm within walking distance from my mother-in-law?s apartment in Sodermalm.

Tantolunden is set up like a small city with streets, street signs, electricity and even addresses for each of the charming houses. One of the oldest KLs in Sweden is found in this community that was established in 1908.

Each KL consists of a tiny house and a small plot of land surrounding it. The houses are as unique as each garden they preside over. Essentially the houses are very elaborate garden sheds. Typically they have two rooms ? a larger one that may contain a cot for naps or small stoves to heat water. The smaller room usually has a dry sink and is used for potting or the storage of garden tools. None of the houses have running water but hoses for garden irrigation and restrooms are conveniently located. Many have rain barrels.

Most gardens are a mixture of edibles and flowers. And most of them take full advantage of their limited space.

Sweden has a short summer and her inhabitants worship the precious warm days they have. Culturally, many Swedes have family summer houses (stuga) that they visit during the summer for weeks at a time. The kolonilotter serve as a type of summer house for urban dwellers who may either not be able to afford the expense or time to visit a traditional summer house.

It is said that Einstein was a community gardener. At one point he received a note about his plot - he needed to clean it up? in order to not lose his gardening privileges he did so immediately. The gardens of Tantolunden don?t have this issue ? each allotment is well tended and well loved. At least the ones that I inspected? and, as my husband can tell you, we saw a lot of them?

To learn more about kolonilotter click [here](#) [2]

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