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Tanto Norra: A Hilltop Allotment in Stockholm

by Deborah E. McMillin

Photos by Deborah E. McMillin

A two-week trip to Sweden with members of the Lakeland Horticulture Society (Windermere, England), concluded with a short stay on the east coast in the capital city of Stockholm where Lake Mälaren meets the Baltic Sea. Stockholm sits on fourteen islands connected by 57 bridges. For the Stockholm city dweller, there are 26 city parks and green spaces where time can be spent for play, sports, concerts and recreation. These urban green spaces have been an important part of Swedish heritage and culture since their establishment during the mid-1800s. Currently, access to nature as a citizen's right, regardless of socioeconomic class, is a major tenet of Swedish society.



One of the largest public parks, Tantolunden, was adjacent to the hotel Zinkensdamm in which our group was staying on the southern island, Södermalm. Included in this popular park's green landscape was Tanto Norra allotment area—93 individual plots on a high hill. In contrast to other gardens I had visited on this tour, the garden's history was based on Sweden's societal needs for fresh food in times of economic hardship - e.g., famine and war. Since the early 18th century, Germany already had in place Schrebergärten gardens (named after the founder, Dr. Daniel Schreber) as a source of food for the cities' working families. By the late 1800s, this practice of

planting small cultivation plots in the cities had spread to Denmark, and in 1895 to southern Sweden at Malmö and Skåne. In Sweden, they designated their garden "colony," after the Latin word "colonus," which means grower.

Anna Lindhagen (1870-1941), a journalist and a member of the Social Democratic Women's Association, had an interest in nature and preserving or building parks in the green areas. She had grown up in a politically active upper-class family in Stockholm. As a nurse working as a child health care inspector, she was acutely aware of the living conditions of the poor and working-class people of Stockholm. Until the mid-1800s, Sweden had been an agriculture economy. Due to famine caused by large crop failures, the country experienced mass migration of farm families not only overseas but to the large cities of

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Sweden where large-scale industrialization was taking hold. Stockholm was becoming a key gateway for trade. The city became overcrowded and polluted as its population increased rapidly. Lindhagen wanted to find a way for the working class to improve their living conditions by having access to fresh produce and a better environment. She visited Germany, Copenhagen, and England and observed the opportunity in those places where laborers were expanding their livelihood by cultivating their own food in the cities in their leisure time.

Lindhagen searched to secure land in open areas near new neighborhoods for the construction of colonies. This endeavor was facilitated by her brother, mayor of Stockholm at the time, and her father, a lawyer who was responsible for much of Stockholm's city planning. The first allotment garden area was established in Stockholm in 1905 on North Djurgården and is a working garden to this day.

Originally, there were rain huts and sheds to house garden equipment. Lindhagen worked with architects to create physical templates for development of the new allotments. Strict rules were put in place regarding a standardized appearance of a simple one room cottage with the exterior painted in the traditional colors of red, white, yellow or dark green. The cottages were not allowed to be used in the winter time, but by the 1920s there would be a sleeping area, a kitchen corner with a wood stove for heating, a small cooking stove, table and chairs and a daybed for warmer weekend overnights.



At the outset, other than initial land grants, the government was not involved in the foundation or administration of the allotments. In 1906, Lindhagen, with her activist friend, Anna Åbergsson, founded The Association of Stockholm's Colonial Gardens to oversee the various allotments, or kolonilotters ("colony of lots") as the garden compounds are called in Sweden. They laid out a program for the working class, based on their group's vision to promote Swedish identity. Lindhagen promoted the cottage concept as a "more effective carrier of cultural identity."

Allotments were tied to the values of sobriety, hard work, healthy diets and recreation through gardening. Some rules did meet resistance. A requirement that a fruit tree or large bush should be planted near the cottage and the encouragement by Lindhagen for the colonist to also grow ornamental plants instead of a monoculture of potatoes caused complaints by the colonists who considered the "poor people's potatoes" the most important nutrient in the country. In response, a free fruit tree was given

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to each colonist who built their cottage, (usually from scrap wood that they collected themselves) per requirements.

It was the outbreak of World War I in 1914, a subsequent food riot in Stockholm, plus near starvation due to food shortages that demonstrated the practical use of the allotments to produce potatoes, fruits and vegetables for the general population. The Tanto allotments in Stockholm were laid out in 1915 on a hillside of boulders. A series of wooden steps were built into the hillside and soil was transported to the top of the hill to build the foundation of the individual gardens. Working class families, many employed in the neighboring sugar refinery, were allotted plots for growing common vegetables and potatoes. Originally, they placed simple shelters on their plots. Later they built small huts or "gazebos," according to the associations rules, in which they could spend nights during the summer.

The establishment of allotments increased during the war throughout cities in Sweden and, by 1918, almost all cities had at least one colony garden area. The City of Stockholm took over responsibility of the Swedish Allotment Gardens in 1921 and "Stockholm Allotment Garden FSSK" was formed as the regional major allotment association and, to this day, sets garden regulations and guidelines for plots with and without structures.

By the 1940s, the gardeners at Tanto, who had been growing traditional vegetables of rhubarb, beetroot, onions, potatoes, lettuce and broad beans, added apple trees, ornamental foxgloves, and dog roses, just as Anna Lindhagen had envisioned. Herbs and berries were also added. Uniformity of the one room cottages was still enforced. World War II increased the use of allotment gardening throughout Sweden.



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In the 1960s, a relaxation of rules allowed larger and individually-designed living cottages with two rooms: allowing a small kitchen with mini appliances, table, chairs, a heater, a day bed for sleeping, and a small room to store garden tools and supplies. Touches of the owner's creativity were allowed, from bric-a-brac on the wooden siding of the cottages to ornamental garden art. In the 1970s, electricity and phone lines were added to the cottages. By now, cold water is provided to each cottage by an outdoor water spigot and communal bathroom facilities are available. At the entrance to the garden a community bulletin board posts current information for the Tanto gardeners.

My visit was in the late evening on a weekday when only a few gardeners could be seen weeding and watering their plots, maximizing their short growing season with the help of the midnight sun that would not complete its descent. As I walked on dry gravel paths with street signs at the crosswalks and cottages numbered, I could see that each plot was stamped by its owner's personality. The landscape of miniature cottages was often a bright display of mid-June ornamental flowers including vegetables.

Styles of gardening included formal gardens, kitchen, countryside, rock and terraced, and gardens incorporating water features. Lucky plots included mature apple trees.

Vegetable growers planted to maximize space, whether traditional in-ground, raised beds, vertical style or terraced on the hillside.



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As I stood on the top of the hill, the evening was quiet with rooftops of the city high-rises visible (above). Now, Tanto is a garden retreat for the individual city dweller, from spring to dark-night frost. As a member of a community, though, there are allotment association rules to be followed. All members participate in the spring and autumn cleanup of common areas. Picket fences that surround individual allotments are short in height, allowing neighbors to casually share garden wisdom or current ecological knowledge. Rain barrels used for water supply are often seen in the gardens. The majority of the community follow organic gardening practices because the Stockholm Allotment Garden FSSK forbids chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Hedges are clipped short so joggers, walkers and cyclists on the public right-of-way can enjoy the garden views. Winter has past, and now it is time to share food, drink and conversation with friends in sunshine and warmth on small patios. Informal get-togethers are part of the allotment-life with midsummer celebration and a light festival in August. At the end of August, the Tanto growers have a harvest festival in Tantolunden Park, sharing their summer bounty with the public.

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Tanto is no longer a garden for the poor potato-grower needing the substance to sustain his life. Vegetables and fruits are now prized for their healthy organic character, not as a needed supplement to diet or income as they were in the early 20th century. Tanto cottages have become an alternative to the country Swedish summer house. There is a waiting list of over 350 names with a small annual charge to keep the name on that list. Wait time can be up to 20 years to own a cottage at Tanto. It is not unusual to find a cottage passed down by inheritance. When a cottage becomes available for purchase, the local society decides on the purchase price. The cottage owner does not own the land on which his cottage sits, but pays as an annual rental fee to the local society close to \$2,000. The local society, in turn, rents the land from the local governmental authority. Now the city of Stockholm has approximately 10,000 individual allotment plots (with or without cottage) in 150 areas of the city, involving approximately 24,000 people. Overall, gardeners are organized in 300 local societies in Sweden.



It was on my visit to Skansen Open Air Living Museum in Stockholm, where five centuries of Sweden's history is displayed, that I found the original cottages and display gardens of Tanto in the 1920s and 1940s. Included in Sweden's living history, it is recognition of the importance that the colony gardens contributed to the health of Sweden's society and individuals since the first kolonilotter gardens of 1895. The colorful mid-June garden mix on a hillside in Södermalm above the Årstaviken Bay, one of Stockholm's oldest kolonilotter (and Sweden's largest) is a testament to a collective and productive use of green spaces to benefit members of its society.