

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 31 (2004)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Gardening : the Swiss say it with flowers
Autor: Eichenberger, Isabelle
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906800>

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The Swiss say it with flowers

Klaus Fässler



Dour Swiss? No way: they're all flower people!

From flower-box to flowerbed, gardening enthusiasts spare neither effort nor cost. Taking all market segments into account, the Swiss spend some CHF 1.5 billion a year on making their immediate environment more beautiful.

IN TOWN AND IN COUNTRY, balconies, patios and windows are ablaze with blooms. In some cases these floral decorations are funded by the municipality, as in Berne, where geraniums are provided by the city council. And for those who have the room, there is no lack of choice: vegetable garden, ornamental garden, pond, conservatory, English, French or Japanese gardens, herb garden or pond. Communities are following this trend, vying to outdo each other in floral competitions. More and more roundabouts are springing up, each one more decorative in appearance than the next. In short, demand is growing for houseplants and flowering pot plants, decorative and fruit-bearing trees, vegetables, rose bushes and other shrubs. Bookshops are overflowing with practical guides and garden planners, and specialised gardening magazines are attracting more and more readers.

Yet the trend is very difficult to quantify. As always when trying to uncover a "commercial secret", those in the trade are jealously protective of their craft. It is estimated that 50 percent of families in Switzerland grow vegetables to a greater or lesser extent. "In my opinion this estimate, which is also supported by a study conducted in France, is relatively accurate," comments Paul-Alain Magnollay, editor-in-chief of "Jardins romands". "Gardening has become a low-cost, useful and democratic leisure activity that knows no class boundaries,"

Exhibitions

Giardina, Zurich – 17 to 21 March

This event was launched in 1997 by a sector of the Basle Messe. It then alternated each year between Basle and Zurich until evolving to become the largest Swiss gardening show with a permanent venue in Zurich. In 2003 Giardina attracted over 50,000 visitors.

Giardina, Geneva – 25 to 28 March

Thanks to its resounding success, Giardina is additionally to be held in French-speaking Switzerland for the first time: Hall 7 of Geneva's Palexpo will be transformed into a gigantic garden.

Lausanne Jardins 2004 – 19 June to 31 October

Every four years the city of Lausanne organises a festival of its municipal gardens. This summer the Vaud metropolis will be presenting some thirty different projects. At the same time the third Lausanne Jardins show will be holding an exhibition in the Forum d'architectures.

says Magnolly, adding that his magazine (circulation 10,000) is posting an increasing readership (+20 percent per year), and that hobby gardening clubs are springing up all over the country.

A flourishing market

According to Carlo Vercelli of the Swiss Association of Master Gardeners, the market generates annual revenues of CHF 1.5 billion. "This figure covers all products and – with the exception of the record heat wave during the second half of 2003 – it is still on the rise." This growing interest is reflected in the increasing number of garden centres and the number of foreign companies entering the Swiss gardening market. With some 80 and 65 garden centres respectively, retail giants Migros and Coop boast a 50 percent market share. Together with Jumbo they make up 70 percent of the market. Urs Jordi, head of gardening retailing at Coop, confirms that "sales are growing by at least 10 percent per annum. We have been monitoring this trend since 1998 and intend to increase the number of garden centres to 85 between now and 2007." The rest of the cake is divided between eight other large garden

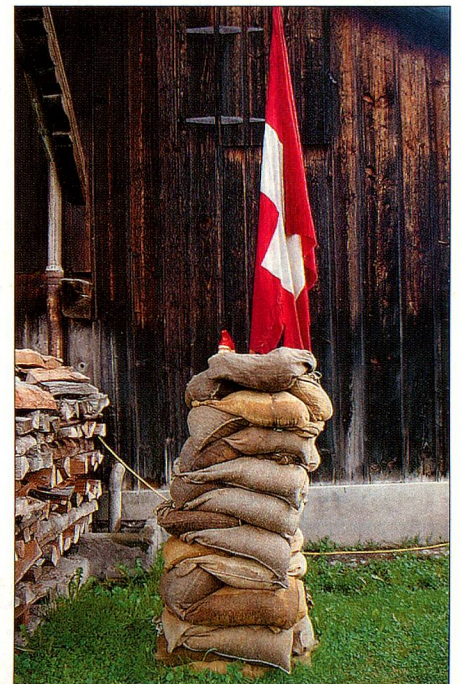
Artistic expression

Ulrich Bloch is a professor of visual arts at the Collège Saint-Michel in Fribourg. He has also made a name for himself as an artist, specialising in outdoor installations. Here he talks about plastic flowers and garden gnomes.

"The Swiss are too keen on closing their gardens off; it's impossible to see in due to the thick hedges they grow," sighs Ulrich Bloch. In common with many other artists, he uses plants as a form of artistic expression. Influenced by his childhood in the border region of Basle, Bloch is convinced that nationality and borders are artificial constructs.

Having started out as a painter, he stumbled by happenstance on the field of garden installations. He works with earth, garden appliances, watering cans, and blow-up plastic flowers. The artist believes that "these accessories are of secondary importance; what I'm really interested in is posing questions about our origins." One of his works features a Swiss cross buried in the ground with a ladder and a cardboard suitcase: the point of departure for a journey "to the earth's interior, in a quest for one's true home." Another is a small fort built of sandbags, protectively surrounding a gigantic flag with a white cross and with a tiny gar-

den gnome as lookout. "The Swiss live a little like garden gnomes, barricading themselves in." One morning the window of the gallery in which this installation was exhibited was covered in spittle. Ulrich Bloch's reaction was: "That's good, because the aim was to provoke a response. And someone really reacted." *IE*



centre operators, some forty smaller outlets, and small market gardeners.

Marc Aeby of Aeby-Kaderli, a garden centre on the outskirts of Fribourg, confirms these statistics: "The passion for gardening continues unabated. Fifty percent of sales in cities are accounted for by balcony and houseplants. In rural regions, these account for one third of sales, and the rest is generated by nursery plants. As far as competition is concerned, there is still room for other operators as long as they have the space and are prepared to offer high quality standards." But the director of Aeby-Kaderli regrets that "nowadays florists are suffering from the same trend that affected agriculture and the retail trade in the 1970s: their numbers are gradually shrinking."

Changed requirements

Hélène Schilliger, director of Schilliger SA in French-speaking Switzerland, believes that

customer behaviour has changed. "Whereas our busiest times used to be at the end of summer and in autumn, business is now at its peak in spring. As soon as the weather becomes warmer, people hanker after flowers and green plants and want to work outdoors. And they want fast results. Bad weather immediately impacts sales." Says Marc Aeby, "To tackle seasonal lows, we have to offer boutique products, i.e. other lines of decorative articles, in order to offset our costs."

The growing demand for "ready-to-bloom" products reflects the spirit of the consumer society: a spirit which has now extended to gardening products. "If people want to spend more money, they do so because they lack patience. They are buying fewer and fewer seeds and seedlings and prefer to spend more on mature or blossoming plants. The same goes for trees and shrubs. Consumers would rather pay more for larger plants," says Hélène Schilliger.

The new garden

For ethnologist Jérémie Forney, the garden has lost its original role. Unless they generate income, the large gardens of former times are disappearing. Aside from farmers who sell produce direct from the farm (currently a growth market), it is not unusual to see buildings surrounded by lawn or concrete where formerly one would have seen flowers and vegetables growing. "Gardens are no longer regarded as a source of income and nutrition for the family, and have become a hobby," concludes the ethnologist. They are also therapeutic for stressed city-dwellers. Given the cost of a head of lettuce, gardening is scarcely worth the effort, especially since nowadays there are fewer mouths to feed than in previous generations. So why not turn it into a pleasurable activity?

Getting in touch with Nature

François Felber of the Neuchâtel Botanical Gardens emphasises the success of floral exhibitions and other major events. "Our visi-


Statistics of a passion

- According to the Federal Office of Statistics, in 2000, 13.1 percent of the Swiss population spent time on handicrafts or gardening at least once a day, and 37.6 percent at least once a week.
- Of the average expenditure of CHF 7418 for a household of 2.4 persons, CHF 532 is spent on leisure activities, and CHF 35 of this (i.e. 0.5 percent of total expenditure) is spent on gardening products.
- The gardening sector covers 1641 businesses (including florists) with a total workforce of more than 7000.

tors have a strong need to get in touch with Nature, but prefer the cultivated rather than the wild variety". There is also a growing demand for outdoor activity, according to Paul-Alain Magnollay, editor-in-chief of

Jardins romands. "People don't want to contemplate Nature in a passive way. They want to play an active role in shaping Nature, and gardening is the ideal solution." A desire to return to our rural roots? Or a need to escape the constraints of a sedentary urban life?

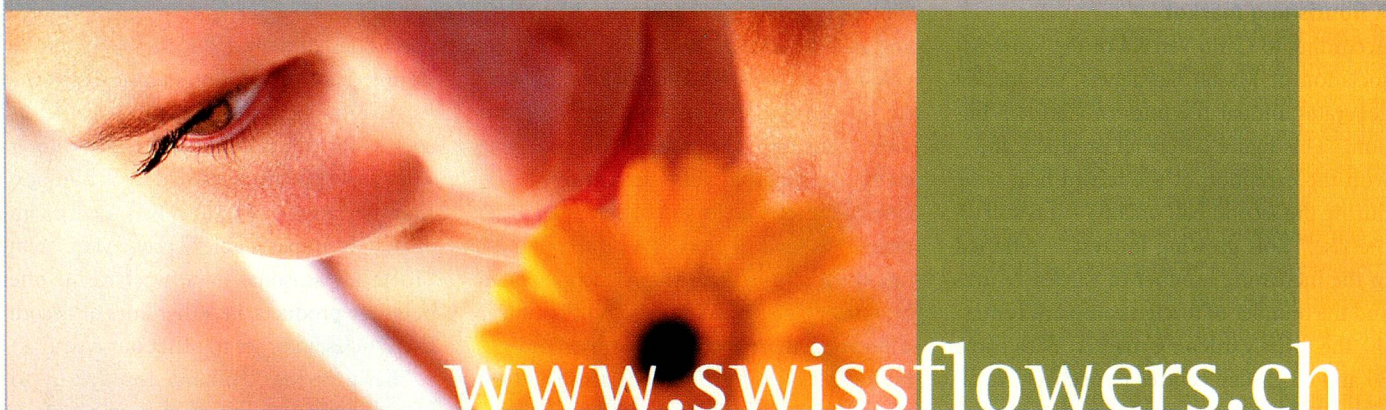
The latter is more likely. Love of the soil is a type of laboratory in which people can "develop an alternative lifestyle", says French anthropologist Jean-Didier Urbain*. In his opinion, the garden has evolved to become "a polyvalent extension of the home".

Isabelle Eichenberger 

* Urbain, Jean-Didier: *Paradies verts. Désirs de campagnes et passions résidentielles*. Payot.

Translated from German

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