

The Tuinhier not-for-profit organisation launches an environmental quality mark for allotment gardens.

Tuinhier, the largest allotment garden federation in Flanders, is launching an environmental quality mark for allotment gardens. As a gardening federation, founded in 1896, we know very well that gardening is not an easy task. The trend towards environmentally-friendly work does not make gardening any easier, as the project associate, Daan Van de Vijver, said. This is why the Tuinhier NFPO wants to reward gardeners who look after their gardens together in a healthy and environmentally friendly way. The environmental quality mark is not just a reward, but also a way to increase diversity and respect for nature in allotment gardens, to modernise older allotment gardens and to reduce the use of pesticides by amateur gardeners.

Protecting nature and life in nature are very current topics at the moment. Consumers' growing awareness of the environment is the main reason for this. Starting from this trend, Tuinhier had the idea to launch an environmental quality mark for allotment gardens and all of the social variances such as "communal gardening". This quality mark is new for our country and serves primarily to reward our gardeners, who spend day after day looking after the garden together so that it is healthy and environmentally friendly. It is a pleasure to give an award to these gardeners, as Daan Van de Vijver said. This quality mark must be considered a vote of appreciation. For Tuinhier there are no winners or losers, as every effort counts. The largest allotment garden federation is particularly targeting awareness and clarity over the use of pesticides. Environmentally friendly gardening is certainly not easy, but it is a challenge to use nature in such a way that chemistry and physic operations become redundant. The use of pesticides in allotment gardens does not fall within the field of application of the general rules (stipulating 0% of pesticides for communal grounds and roadsides for example), but the prescribed "minimal usage" (for example for grounds accessible to the public in general) must be observed. This is a grey area that in future will probably become "no pesticides". Tuinhier especially wants to contribute to reducing the use of pesticides. In our strategic plan we stipulate that the organisation wants to promote sustainable and natural gardening. We don't limit our activities to environmentally friendly gardening but we see it in a wider context, said Van de Vijver. Given that our federation has 25,000 member gardeners, Tuinhier's awareness drive can certainly make a difference.

To give more impact to this quality mark, Tuinhier has formed a panel of people who work in the environment and gardening sector. Together with Tuinhier, they will give advice and professional support to allotment gardens who want to receive a quality mark. The allotment gardens will be inspected across four

criteria: plans, management, preparation and education. For each of these four evaluation criteria you can achieve one star, explains Van de Vijver. Gardeners still using pesticides will not receive a star for management, but can still receive the other three stars over the two years of the project. The panel will visit each allotment garden site to make a list of the opportunities to contribute towards biodiversity and a more natural way of managing the site.

Members of the allotment garden associations who aspire to obtain the quality mark will be fully trained on environmentally friendly gardening via evening seminars. Daan Van de Vijver promises professional support. It will not be done alone, but with help of the members of the panel. At the end of the two year transformation period, the panel will visit the site again. Depending on the progress made, the members will receive between one and four stars. Or no stars. But this is unlikely, given the intensive support from Tuinhier . Thanks to the knowledge they have acquired, the gardeners will have many ways to keep their quality mark through biyearly evaluations.

The first inspection took place on the 2nd of July 2016 in the *Slotenkouter* allotment garden site in Sint-Amandsberg (West Flanders). The Flemish Minister for the Environment, Joke Schauvliege, marked the start of the project. Meanwhile, there is already a second site in Peer (Limburg) that wants to take up the challenge.





















