

The Gardeners of the Bostans

Photos and Text by Caroline Silber

In studying Istanbul's bostans and the ongoing, existential struggle for their future, it is important to remember that central to the conflict are the gardeners themselves, along with their families and communities. In some cases, their connection to these gardens reaches back generations.

The following photo essay is comprised of images captured in the course of multiple visits to the city's bostans. It focuses on those most directly affected by the present struggle between the municipality and the activists over the fate of Istanbul's historic gardens: the people themselves who work the land, and the communities in which they live.

Although Istanbul's famed bostans have been under siege by advancing urban development for decades and their numbers have fallen to under 1000 (Kaldjian, 287), there are still places in Istanbul where their green expanse creates the illusion of countryside. Most of Istanbul's remaining bostans are located in Yedikule in the Fatih municipality on the other side of the Golden Horn from Istanbul's Taksim Square and Gezi Park. *Yedikule* means "seven towers" and refers to the four Byzantine and three Ottoman towers in the city walls (*The New Yorker*; Batuman).

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The photo on the following page was taken at the Church Garden and shows a cistern of the type commonly used to provide the bostans with water. Some farmers live right on their bostan, but most live nearby. Here, we see housing for the farmer's family directly adjacent to the cistern waters. The deep shadow in this scene is created by the trees as well as the canopy of grapevines that make a trellised roof – another common feature of bostans.

Traditionally, bostans were sited near sources – creeks, streams, and springs – that supplied the water needed for the crops. In this photo we see how that tradition continues, although here the

water source is man-made, an elevated concrete cistern. Floating in the cool green waters of the cistern are radishes, another of Istanbul's urban crops.

I framed the shot to capture the bright hues of the laundry hanging in the back of the photo, in parallel with the similarly jewel-like tones of the radishes in the foreground – the man-made and natural existing side by side. Kaldjian quotes one farmer as describing the work of gardeners as “holy work” (Kaldjian, 287) and I think this scene has a spiritual quality. There is a serene, almost otherworldly feel to it.





This photo along with the next two show the piping, baskets, wooden crates, and other more pedestrian elements of the farming life. But while some could view these piles of detritus as emblematic of what critics label the unsightly, un-modern, and “unhygienic” nature of the bostans, I see something very different. These are not piles of refuse, but rather essential components of a working farm. I think that in each of these photos, these objects – necessary, productive, useful – have an almost sculptural quality: They are works of art in their own right.









This photo depicts a woman who works at the Church Garden, proudly showing off her staked tomato plants. It also illustrates how Istanbul's urban gardens are deeply integrated into the fabric of their urban landscape: Here the crops are sandwiched between trafficked streets and apartment buildings.

Sabri (next page) is a farmer who now works at the Church Garden. When we arrived, he was the only farmer in the field. He was busy preparing his vegetables for market the next day, making up for the morning hours lost to the rains. But, despite this, he still agreed to speak to us, provided we came into the fields with him and asked him questions as he worked. At one point he noted that we would “learn more doing what I do rather than being in school.” But he said it with a smile.

Sabri is from the Cide region, in the Black Sea province of Kastamonu, where his family owned their own land and where he worked in the cornfields. The Cideli – who now dominate the bostan communities – arrived in post-war, 1950s Istanbul as hired labor

for the Bulgarians and Albanians; these groups themselves had earlier assumed the “master gardener” status from the Greeks and Armenians who started Istanbul’s bostan tradition in the 1600s (Kaljian, 292). As is typical of most of the Cideli farmers – the average Cideli farmer is over 50 and migrated to Istanbul in the 1970s (Kaldjian, 286) – Sabri came to Istanbul when he was 18, traveling on his own. However, because there is such a large Cide community, Sabri has always had a wide circle of friends and relatives in Yedikule.

When I asked why he came from Cide to Istanbul, he replied, “Just as everyone goes somewhere, I came here. Like you came here.”





Sabri has worked on various bostans around Yedikule; his previous bostan had beehives. He lives on this bostan with his brother and his brother's children, and Sabri himself has five children, one of whom works in a hospital, and at least one son who like him is a gardener. Sabri explained that this son did not learn his trade from him – he "apprenticed" on another bostan in Yedikule, though Sabri notes that the techniques they use are the same.

Sabri's experience is typical of many Cideli farmers; they do not own their own land but rather work as hired labor or renters (bostan critics would say "squatters"), frequently moving from bostan to bostan around Yedikule (Kaldjian, 293; *The New Yorker*, Batuman). This status as transients has accelerated in recent years, as more and more bostans disappear and opportunities for work disappear along with them.



Sabri noted that he “eats whatever the soul wants,” and works every day just like he eats every day. In discussing the crops he grows he observed that “everything is hard to grow” (the biggest pests in the garden are the birds), and “every crop” – meaning anything that grows – is his favorite. Sabri also observed that he enjoys working in the garden because he likes the outdoors and “You enjoy any work that brings you bread.” When asked what occupation he would have if he were not a gardener, he responded, “God knows.”

Sabri is photographed here in one of Yedikule’s fields of lettuce, the crop that used to be celebrated for being particularly succulent, soft, and oily – allegedly as a result of the fat in the soil from the neighboring long-defunct leather factories (Kaldjian, 286). While the original “Yedikule lettuce” no longer exists, its modern descendent shares many of its same attributes. The backbreaking labor of toiling in the gardens is on display in these photos of Sabri – an aging man – hoisting heavy baskets laden with produce. I particularly like the photo of Sabri with the uplifted basket – he looks like Atlas, bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. It is an apt metaphor.

The children in this photo and the next are Sabri's nieces and nephews. When I tried to talk to them, they just giggled and hid their faces. While the preservationists tend to romanticize the urban farming life, the photos of these children illustrate the other reality of that life; namely, the hardship and poverty that many farmers now experience (*The New Yorker*, Batuman). Rapidly rising land costs in Istanbul and increasing government pressure has reduced the profit margins available, and has turned these endeavors into what is closer to subsistence farming (Kaldjian, 293).

The children depicted here are fed, clothed, and obviously cared for, but it is a hard life and it shows. The little girl standing in her one pink slipper has a face that is much older than her years; it is a knowing, adult face on a child's body, notably at odds with the childlike ducky on her sweater.







These are some other children living on or near the Church Garden.



These pictures are portraits of another kind, depicting the quotidian objects of everyday farming life in the bostans.





Aleks took us to lunch at one of his favorite restaurants in Yedikule. Abdullah, pictured, is the owner of the restaurant.

Prominently featured in the restaurant – given a place of honor on the wall – is a portrait of Hussein Pasha, an important figure in the local farming community.

During lunch, Abdullah brought over another man, who was introduced to us as Pasha's nephew, Riza Güce.

Güce is a retired farmer, but the bostans are clearly still very important to him – he spoke emotionally of his boyhood and recalled his work in the gardens as a vocation and way of life, not just a job. Güce is of Albanian descent and has fond memories of working in the fields. He has particularly vivid memories of eating the famous Yedikule lettuce with his friends – lettuce that was “so large one piece was too much for one person” and so juicy that “water ran down your chin when you bit into it.” He recalled that, on the bostan, children helped their mothers with the weeding, while the men of the community were generally responsible for the planting of the seeds. However, he emphasized that, when gardening, everyone just did whatever work needed to be done.

Güce recalls with nostalgia the Yedikule neighborhood of his youth, where Greeks, Armenians, and Albanians all lived together. He noted that during the 1955-1960s Cyprus Conflict, which resulted in the deportation of many Greeks, the city lost some of its most talented people, and the neighborhood never fully recovered. He says he remembers watching Greek gardens burn when he was eight years old.

Güce was still bitter when he spoke about his former bostan location, where apartment buildings now stand. He is upset that many of the people now moving to Yedikule know nothing about gardening or the bostan traditions.





Güce went to get some old photographs. In this photo from 1963, Güce explained that, of the people pictured, one is Greek, one is Armenian, and also pictured is the famous, now-extinct Yedikule lettuce. He made a joke about how none of the things in this photo exists anymore.





Güce also showed us this picture of a gardener's car. This photo, and Güce's own attire and appearance, illustrate how profoundly the fortunes of Yedikule gardeners seem to have fallen over the years. Bostan farming was once a more prestigious profession than it is now, and Güce seemed more prosperous than any of the other present-day gardeners we met. Perhaps one reason Güce has such fond memories of bostan life is that the position was far more comfortable and secure then than it is today, when

many gardeners see farming as a job – and a hard one at that – and less as a calling. As boys, Güce and his friends frequently hung out in the garden of a man they called Crazy Toma, which today is the site of a mosque. After showing us these photos, Güce took us to see where Crazy Toma's garden used to be. While most of the property is now given over to the mosque, there is still some untended garden space and the water well remains.



Güce contemplates the bostan of Crazy Toma, only a section of which was not sacrificed to make room for a mosque.



This is Hassan Sargin, who has been gardening for 31 years. Like Sabri and many others, he is from the Cide region and came to Yedikule where he has worked as a laborer on many different bostans. He says that while the farming techniques in Cide and in Yedikule were comparable, in Cide farming largely meant subsistence farming, whereas in Yedikule it is farming for the market.

When asked to name his favorite crop, he chose purslane because it grows in just 19 days and he can bring it to market sooner than other crops. Hassan told us that this will be his last season in Yedikule before he returns to Cide.



Hassan's bare, soil-laden feet; Güce's shiny, immaculately white lace-ups; and, Aleks' hiking boots.



In the challenging economic environment in which Istanbul's farmers exist, bostans rely on the labor of children and other household members (Kaldjian, 293). At the same garden where we met Hassan, we also met a young boy named Mustafa, who was in perpetual motion hauling crates of vegetables from the garden to a shaded area near the cistern. He stopped to speak with us briefly, explaining that he wants to be a gardener when he grows up, despite the fact that he dislikes eating vegetables

Mustafa does not appear to have considered a different career track, despite the hard labor and the uncertainty of not knowing whether the bostan you are tending will even exist next season. But watching this boy as he worked, I could imagine why gardening so appeals to him. Farming is very physical, "manly" work, and Mustafa seemed mature and to enjoy acting like an adult. Further, there is something satisfying about the tangible sense of physical completion and accomplishment that comes with this work: with farming, at the end of the day, you have something to show for it.



The next bostan we visited was a garden Aleks had never been to that was located across the street from Hassan's. When we walked in, a dog immediately started barking. A farmer named Ali (pictured above) came out to quiet the dog, and then told us that it was a good thing he was there or else the dog would have attacked us. I decided against attempting to photograph the attack dog.

Ali does not work on this bostan, but was just "helping out" – a concept that illustrates the strong sense of community that still imbues Yedikule. In this photo, you get a sense of the history of the quarter from the old gravestones that are visible along the wall.





On the same garden plot we met a teenage boy who did not look like the other farmers we had met. His unmuscled arms and clean, uncallused hands made him look more like a university student temporarily helping out than a professional gardener. He was using the ladder in the photo to pick figs, which are currently in season. Fruit trees – fig, mulberries, and quince, among others – are common producers in the bostans (Kaldjian, 296). When I showed him this photo, he smiled and remarked, “Ooh, I look good.”



We had met Mehmet a few weeks before at a garden in the northern part of the city near the Black Sea after his bostan in Yedikule was destroyed last year. Mehmet had been working by the Black Sea, but moved back to Yedikule because of a payment disagreement at the other bostan. Mehmet discussed the therapeutic aspects of gardening: he explained that he liked to garden in bare feet because of “the electricity transfer” between skin and soil.



Mehmet then told us how he would like to open up a farming school to teach gardening techniques. He described his idea of carving out a small area of the bostan to create a spot where students could be taught. Perhaps testing out his teaching skills, Mehmet then showed us how to create tavas and let us try it ourselves – which was significantly harder than it looks.

Mehmet climbed into this tree to hand us ripe figs. In a city where 30-40% of household income is spent on food (Kaldjian, 288), the food security provided by the bostans plays a not-insubstantial role in the survival of working class communities.



We met this gardener on the same bostan in the northern part of the city by the Black Sea where we met Mehmet. This farmer used to work in Yedikule but has moved here. He explained that crops grow later by the Black Sea because of the climate difference, so he sells his crops after they are sold at Yedikule. He has another plot of land right next door with many fruit trees that he may have to sell because he cannot find people to help him work the land.



This girl, whom we met in Yedikule while talking to Mehmet, is named Semya. She explains that though she lives on the bostan, she is not a gardener herself – she works at a clothing store and avoids gardening “because it’s dirty.” The man is her father.

When asked if she had any funny stories relating to the gardens, Senya told a quick story. Later, I inadvertently gave her a better story: She picked some grapes and passed them to us. I took the first one, and as I put it in my mouth she made a face. Then Mehmet made a face as well, and they told me to spit out the grape. I said “Why? It tastes fine.” And then Aleks explained that the grape I ate had “bird poop” on it. This made Semya happy because it gave her a funny story to add to her repertoire of garden tales.



This photo shows Semya's father with another gardener; it was unclear whether she is Senya's mother. The woman is gardening inside a covered, greenhouse-like plot. This structure is notable because on those bostans where ownership and land tenure is uncertain, farmers tend not to invest in infrastructure. However, on bostans where tenure is less uncertain, farmers invest in greenhouses, beehives, and even sprinkler systems (Kaldjian 298).

Apart from their contributions to food security, ecological preservation, community safety, and general aesthetic appeal, Istanbul's bostans provide an important link to the past of this most historic of cities. They also preserve the deep, spiritual link we have to the land. Kaldjian quotes a farmer who predicted that Istanbul's future inhabitants will return to the soil, "Because people will miss the green things." (Kaldjian, 302).

Those who advocate the destruction of the bostans by employing a purely "economic" analysis miss an essential point. There are some things that have human value that cannot be captured on a spreadsheet. I submit that an enduring connection to the land and to the history of a community, is one such value worthy of preservation.

