

Finalist's case study

The University of Leeds Facilities and Services Sustainable Garden

Section 1 About the project

Summary

The Sustainable Garden is a multi-purpose, public space developed on a previously unused plot of accessible roof-space. The garden is open to all and is used for edible planting, research projects and relaxation space for students, staff and visitors to the campus, providing teaching opportunities and allowing local community groups to use the garden for sessions.

Project partners

- The University of Leeds
- Leeds University Union
- Water@Leeds

Section 2 The results

The problem

The Sustainable Garden is surrounded by Grade II* listed buildings and is also on a roof. Considerable time and effort was required to realise our vision to provide a 4 multi-functional space for all to enjoy quiet contemplation and improve wellbeing and can also cultivate and maintain an allotment and forest style edible garden. As a demonstration of a healthy functioning ecosystem, the site needed to include wildflower areas, soft fruit hedgerows, insect houses and pocket habitats as well as permeable footpaths, rainwater harvesting and research opportunities, all of which presented unique problems that needed to be addressed individually.

The approach

A number of stakeholders were engaged, including the Leeds University Union Bardon Grange food growing initiative, academic staff from the school of Geography, the Water@Leeds initiative:

<http://www.wateratleeds.org/> and estates grounds staff. The objective was to ensure we took the best elements of our gold award-winning RHS flower show entry and recreate the space on campus. Our tender specification was written with all of the sustainable features included and this was an entirely electronic process, with paperless meetings, ensuring no excessive waste was produced as part of the process.

Our goals

The garden was developed holistically and designed with sustainability features embedded. It provides opportunity for those who may be interested in gardening, as well as a variety of other opportunities through research in construction, ecology, sociology and much more. What makes this even more important is its legacy – there are few projects that can claim to have the permanence of the sustainable garden, which will re-engage our new students each year, who, then will leave with an increased understanding of urban food,



Profile

Example:

- 31,324 students from 147 countries
- 7,517 staff of 102 different nationalities
- City centre location

Category supported by



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water research and experience of the Living Lab concept in action. The garden provides a permanent spot for research, knowledge and culture change on campus.

Obstacles and solutions

Obstacles:

- Potential limitations of being a rooftop space
- Planning issues with being surrounded by Grade II* listed buildings
- The site is open access and mixed-use

Solutions:

- Careful appointment of a landscape architect
- Special soil formula and innovative gardening practices developed to reduce weight
- Close liaison with all key stakeholders, including Leeds City Council at all stages of the project
- A sense of ownership has now been instilled into the cultural fabric of the institution and the wider Leeds area, creating a 'hub' for biodiversity in the city. This was achieved through a number of engagement and promotional events, outreach workshops with local schools, weekly participation sessions and through wider participation, the whole Leeds community.

Performance and results

The University of Leeds is a public, city campus, so the garden was built with intentions of encouraging local and wider communities to use the space. We lead a number of training sessions allowing best practice to be emulated across the urban garden spaces throughout Leeds, allowing us to contribute to a city-wide edible corridor.

We have improved biodiversity by growing plants that attract bees and insects, further supporting the work of the Sustainability Action Group on campus who maintain a campus apiary, in turn cultivating stronger internal working relationships. The garden encourages biodiversity in coherence with the University's Biodiversity Action Plan and Biodiversity Steering Group, through developing habitats and acting as a hub for biodiversity in Leeds.

We engage stakeholders through various volunteering opportunities, giving skills that can be taken and replicated elsewhere. We have engaged with the campus nursery, Bright Beginnings who have visited the garden to learn about edible planting and growing. Engaging with young children has allowed us to influence behavior from an early age, allowing us to introduce biodiversity to children living in an otherwise urban environment.

We have encouraged water management concepts – the path in the garden showcases current research at the University, using crushed glass to allow the water to be held in the soil, reducing run-off.

Our 'research pods' embed the living lab for student education and research, supporting the upcoming integrated sustainability strategy.

The garden is a physical and tangible symbol for sustainability at the University, increasing our visibility as a service, and clearly demonstrating our commitment to sustainability.

Section 3 The future

Lessons learned

The sustainable garden was created as a space unlike any other. As such, in the first year, many discoveries have been made. One example was that some plants could only be harvested once and took considerable space, so in the second year these were replaced with alternatives that kept providing crop. Also, lots of harvesting would occur on plants that were not yet ready, so a traffic-light signage system to explain when plants are ready to crop has been developed. Monitoring is also done to ensure we plan gardening sessions to fit around lectures, work patterns, etc. and we have changed these a number of times to find the best fit, which change at different times of year.

The most significant lesson that couldn't have been anticipated is the amount of positive feedback received from visitors to the garden. Many people have commented that this is the expected aesthetic on a 21st century city campus. This has, in turn started to impact on future decisions for the management of the campus as a whole and created a benchmark for the living lab concept to be rolled out across the site.

Sharing our project

The success of the sustainable garden was noted nationwide before it was even opened. It was awarded a Leeds Architecture Award in 2013, and visits to campus have been facilitated for a number of other institutions such as Plymouth University, Swansea University, Leeds Trinity, Leeds Met, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, Groundwork North-East and the RSPB.

The garden is open to all, as is the work we do on it – if anybody has any questions; we are always happy to share our knowledge.

What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

The University of Leeds takes seriously its responsibility for social, environmental, cultural and economic impacts, aiming to have an overall positive impact on society. The Green Gown Awards are an excellent way of confirming our commitment to sustainability and demonstrating that we practice what we preach!

Further information

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