

Greenery and Residential



Image: moolwatplantendoen.nl

Greenery in and around residential homes and apartments is good for the climate and living environment, both indoors and out. It has a positive effect on the health and well-being of residents and visitors in general, while also raising property values.

This document provides information on how homes and well-being can benefit from greenery, including references to scientific literature. It concludes with some tips on how to ensure the successful and beneficial inclusion of greenery.

WHAT DOES GREENERY DO?

- Indoor plants purify the air: they reduce the concentrations of CO₂ and volatile organic compounds, keeping air fresh and healthy.
- Outdoor vegetation reduces heat in and around homes in the summer, lowering heat stress and reducing the need for air-conditioning.
- Green roofs and facades increase insulation capacity, reducing both heating and cooling expenditure.
- 'Green views' reduce stress levels in general.
- People spend more time outdoors in green environments, and are more active.
- Outdoor areas that include greenery help foster a better social climate.
- Greenery regulates the disposal of rainwater, limiting potential flooding.
- Indoor plants humidify the air through transpiration, reducing headaches and improving concentration.

APPLICATIONS

- Put indoor plants in living spaces and bedrooms.
- Green roofs and facades.
- Green gardens with trees and shrubs, and hedges instead of paving.
- Ensure enough parks and other public nature areas in residential zones.
- Vertical gardens for houses directly abutting the street.
- Trees and other types of greenery in and along roads.



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PROVEN SUCCESS

- In less-wealthy suburbs in particular, children use less ADHD medication (such as Ritalin) the more greenery there is in their surrounding environment. ¹
- In living environments with more natural elements (such as greenery or water), residents suffer less from anxiety disorders than in areas with fewer natural elements. ²
- An American study among identical twins showed a negative correlation between greener environments and depression. ³
- A study in Toronto revealed that people in neighbourhoods with higher tree density not only felt significantly healthier, but also showed significantly lower rates of cardiovascular disease. Ten extra trees per city block delays the onset of age-related health conditions by an average of seven years. ⁴



Sources:

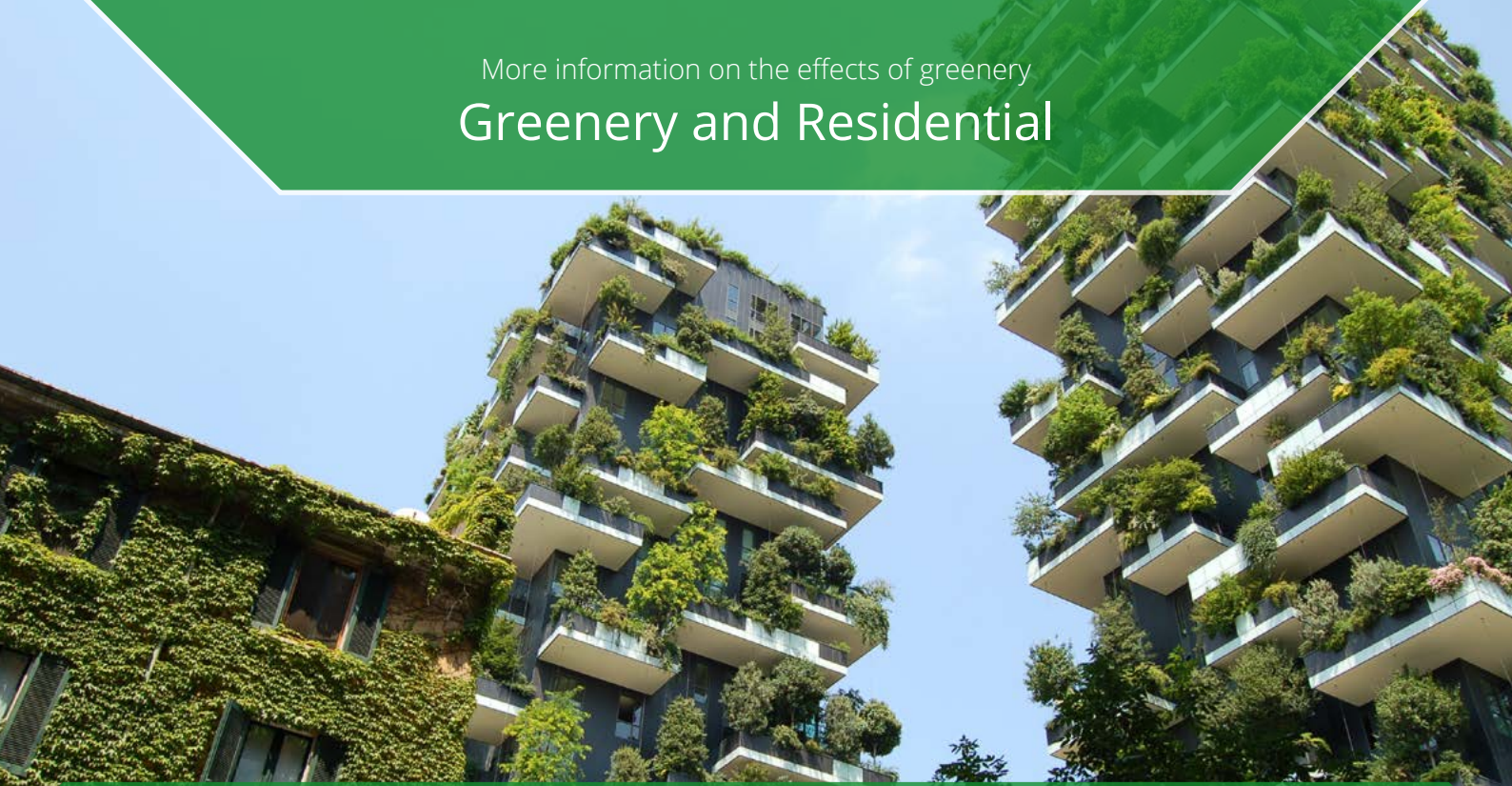
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URBAN TEMPERATURES

Average temperatures in cities are generally higher than in surrounding areas (the 'heat-island' effect), because hard surfaces (such as roads and buildings) absorb more radiation from the sun and release it into the immediate environment. The density of built-up areas limits air exchange with the broader environment, trapping the heat in the city. This effect occurs in both metropolitan and provincial cities, and increases as built-up areas become denser. Measured in the Netherlands, maximum differences in ambient temperature due to the heat-island effect vary from one to several degrees, with peak values reaching around 8 °C and incidental values even exceeding 10 degrees.

Extremely high temperatures during heat waves leads to heat stress, adversely affect health (particularly among the elderly, chronically ill and pregnant women) and can increase mortality rates. Research has shown that 35% of urban areas in the Netherlands already experience heat stress at least 7 days per year. Rising urban density and climate change will increase the frequency of periods of heat stress in cities.

Green zones absorb less heat during the day and cool off more quickly at night than surfaced urban areas, reducing heat stress.

HOW GREENERY WORKS

- A 10% increase in urban vegetation reduces the heat-island effect by an average of 0.6 °C. ¹
- Greenery provides cooling by limiting solar radiation (i.e. providing shade) and through water evaporation. The evaporative cooling effect is strongest in the afternoon, evening and early night-time. This is important, as heat stress during sleep has significant adverse health effects.
- Studies show that people feel more comfortable in green environments during warmer weather. ²
- Parks stay cooler than dense built-up city centres during hot weather, with measured temperature differences of over 5 °C. Shade has the greatest effect: it helps lower air temperatures, and the reduced solar radiation beneath trees considerably raises levels of thermal comfort. ³
- Parks not only provide 'cool islands' in warmer urban environments, but also have a cooling effect on the surrounding neighbourhoods. The effect depends on the size of the park, and has been measured up to 700 m away. ⁴
- A combination of green facades, front gardens and roadside trees works best to reduce heat in streets, and can lower temperatures at pedestrian level by 2 °C. ⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To improve thermal comfort and prevent heat stress in urban areas, it is important to increase the ratio of vegetated areas to surfaced areas and buildings.
- Thermal comfort for residents is primarily linked to the amount of shade provided: trees with large canopies are the most effective, both in parks and on the street. As such, it is important to create healthy growing conditions for trees.
- The evaporative cooling effect is limited to the immediate vicinity of the plants; utilising this effect on a neighbourhood-wide scale requires a fine and extensive network of greenery.
- The cooling effect of evaporation only works when the plants receive enough water, so be sure to design and manage effective watering facilities. Irrigating trees and plants can help during dry periods.
- Green roofs aid home insulation and prevent overheating in summer, and large-scale application can help cool down entire neighbourhoods.
- Greenery must be planted to allow for neighbourhood air flow, as fresh air significantly helps to reduce the heat-island effect.

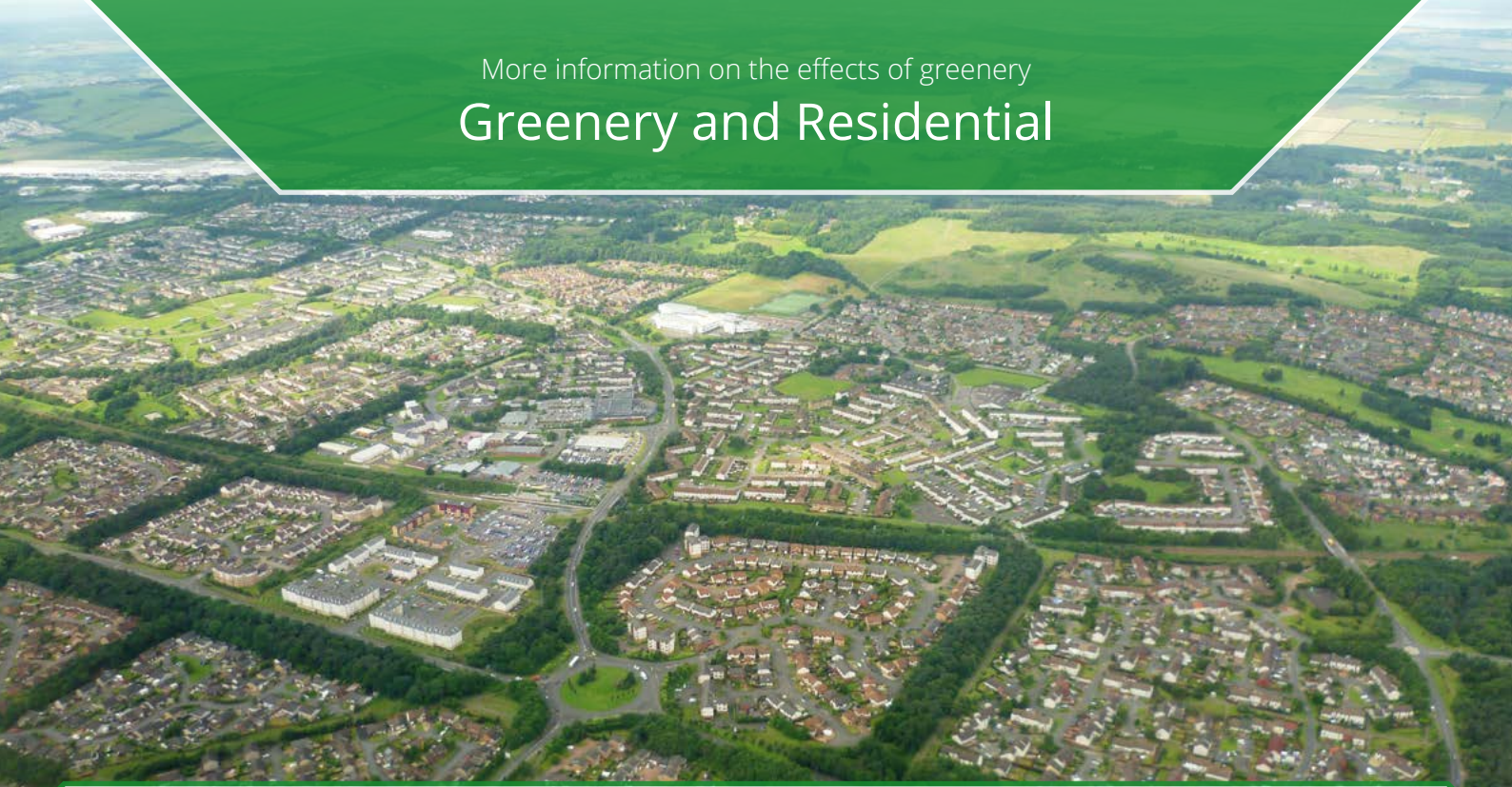
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AIR QUALITY

The major air pollutants in urban areas (nitrous oxides (NO_x), particulates (PM10/PM2.5) and volatile organic compounds such as benzene) come from industry and traffic. Long-term exposure to these substances leads to lung problems and cardiovascular disease. Although air quality at most locations in the Netherlands complies with standards, this does not mean the risk is eliminated entirely, and busy city roads are places where limits are regularly exceeded. According to recommendations by the WHO, continuing to tighten the PM2.5 standard in the Netherlands would extend the average lifespan by 3 months, reduce premature deaths by 600 and lower sick days by 1.5 million per year. From a public health standpoint, the standard should never be the goal – air pollution in any form (even if under the limit) is ultimately detrimental to health and well-being.

Urban areas combine high population density with peak activity (busy roads), in principle making local measures to improve air quality very effective. The filtration and screening effects provided by greenery can contribute greatly in this regard.

HOW GREENERY WORKS

- All forms of greenery help purify the air of particulate matter and pollutants. Gaseous contaminants are absorbed by leaves, and particulates are filtered passively.¹
- Trees are most effective due to their size and volume: the average city tree traps 100 grams of particulate matter per year, equivalent to the quantity produced by 5500 car kilometres.²
- Other types of greenery also help purify the air: one square metre of ivy collects 4-6 grams of particulate matter per year, and a stonecrop roof catches 0.15 g/m².³
- Dense vegetation can be used to screen off residential areas or sensitive buildings from sources of pollution (such as busy roads).⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase the numbers of mature trees to boost the filter capacity.
- Large and healthy trees are the most effective, so be sure to provide good growth conditions.
- Evergreen conifers are most effective at trapping particulates; broad-leaved trees with large, fuzzy or sticky leaves are a good alternative.
- Trees with flat, broad leaves are most suitable for absorbing ozone and nitrogen dioxide.
- Species that secrete large amounts of volatile organic compounds should be avoided.
- Shade in car parks limits evaporation of fuel from fuel tanks, raises comfort upon departure and lowers energy consumption by air-conditioning systems.
- Ambient air exchange is extremely important for air quality. Greenery should therefore not isolate streets (creating a 'green canyon') – green roofs and facades are good alternatives.
- Dense vegetation can, however, help to protect residential and other sensitive areas (schools, hospitals, aged care facilities, etc.) against pollution from nearby sources.
- The Peace Lily (*Spatiphyllum*) is the best-known plant for indoor air quality. Calatheas, Chlorophytum, Areca Palms, Dracaena and various ferns are other good options.

Sources:

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STRESS AND CONCENTRATION CAPACITY

Infectious diseases used to be the primary cause of sickness absence. Nowadays however, they have been replaced by lifestyle-related conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, and conditions related to depression and anxiety. Chronic stress is a key risk factor in this regard: 75-90% of all GP visits are thought to be stress-related. Green living environments help improve health and lower stress.

HOW GREENERY WORKS

- Green environments are more calming than built-up areas: people recover more quickly from stress, concentration is restored faster, and people are in a better mood. ¹
- Children with ADHD show higher levels of concentration after walking in a city park than after walking for the same length of time through a residential area or city centre. 10% less ADHD medication is prescribed for children in green environments (this does not apply to 'wealthy' suburbs). ²
- Greener living environments are associated with a lower risk of stress-related conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, depression and anxiety disorders. ³
- Even a view of diverse greenery from the home has demonstrated lower levels of cortisol (a stress hormone), and an improved sense of well-being. ⁴
- Particularly populations who are unable or not likely to seek out nature far from their homes (such as children, the elderly, and groups with low socio-economic status) benefit from local greenery. ⁵
- People who move to greener areas show improved long-term mental health. ⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Plant a wide variety of local greenery: this will increase the likelihood of use and social interaction, and the benefits to well-being. All forms of greenery (trees, bushes, shrubs, perennials, etc.) amplify the positive effects.
- Ensure proper maintenance: visible neglect and litter make people feel unsafe.
- Consider environmental factors that can impede a restful experience, such as traffic noise.
- Do not focus entirely on green zones: also consider smaller natural elements, such as street trees and garden plants.
- Make the vegetation visible and usable: people must be able to experience it – green walls seem more effective in this sense than green roofs, unless they form part of a view or are accessible (rooftop parks).
- Greenery in the immediate environment is particularly important to people who spend a lot of time in their residential areas.

Sources:

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SOCIAL COHESION

Despite the high population density, big-city life can be quite anonymous. Loneliness and social isolation are risk factors for mental illness: they increase the likelihood of depression, which the WHO predicts will be public health issue no. 1 by 2020. A greater sense of social cohesion in neighbourhoods mitigates this risk. Even simple things such as running into people regularly in public spaces, recognising one's neighbours and greeting one another in passing can help people feel at home. A greater sense of social cohesion also helps people feel safer in their neighbourhoods, which is also a key factor in well-being.

HOW GREENERY WORKS

- Attractive greenery in living environments can encourage people to go outdoors (or do so more often) and meet their neighbours, indirectly benefiting well-being by strengthening the neighbourhood sense of community.¹
- People exhibit more social behaviour while (or after) spending time in green environments.²
- More greenery is also associated with lower levels of aggression and crime, providing an additional boost to health and well-being – either directly, or via the increased sense of security.³

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Greenery must elicit feelings of safety; overgrown and/or visibly neglected vegetation can make people feel unsafe.
- Greenery should serve a relatively small area: a small (safe and attractive) local park is better than a large city park, as the main purpose is to facilitate meetings among neighbours.
- Promoting extended visits will increase the likelihood of chance meetings. Place benches around a central point of interest in a nature zone, for example, such as a water feature.
- When designing a green area, keep the target audience in mind. Facilitating meetings seems especially important among the elderly.
- If green areas are to serve multiple functions, they must be compatible and not lead to conflicts among the various users.

Sources:

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Image: mooihoutplantendoen.nl

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

A lack of physical activity (and, by extension, obesity) is a key risk factor for health. It is the largest cause of illness after smoking. Obesity increases the risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. According to Dutch health standards, one-third of adults do not get enough physical activity. This rate is higher (and targets more stringent) among children and young people. There is also more and more evidence showing that sedentary behaviour (sitting or lying down) is a risk factor in itself. Children are already advised to limit such behaviour, and local green areas provide opportunities for sport and exercise.

HOW GREENERY WORKS

- Local greenery correlates to higher levels of physical activity (mostly playing outside), particularly among boys of primary-school age.¹
- There is no strong evidence that more (or more attractive) greenery in the surroundings makes adults exercise more, however people do enjoy recreational activities in natural surroundings. The opportunity to take part in certain recreational activities can therefore mediate visits to local green areas, and allow people to enjoy other health benefits provided by greenery.²
- Gardening is another form of nature-related physical activity, although it can also be further removed from home (garden parks, garden allotments, urban farms, etc.).³

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To promote physical activity, focus mainly on the potential leisure activities in green areas.
- The areas must be easy and safe to access, as well as safe to be in. Exactly what this entails will depend on the target population (e.g. children vs. elderly).
- Infrastructure and facilities are also important, as these must facilitate (or at least permit) the desired activity. The minimum required area will depend on the intended activities.
- The required facilities will also depend on the target population. For children, this may mean free play areas; for senior citizens, level walking paths.
- The greater the focus on the activity, the more ornamental the greenery becomes – unless the activities themselves involve interaction with nature (survival, mountain-biking, treehouse-building, gardening).

Sources:

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FURTHER INFORMATION

There are many real-life applications that illustrate and demonstrate the added value of vegetation.

Useful sources of information include:

www.thegreencity.com

www.wur.nl

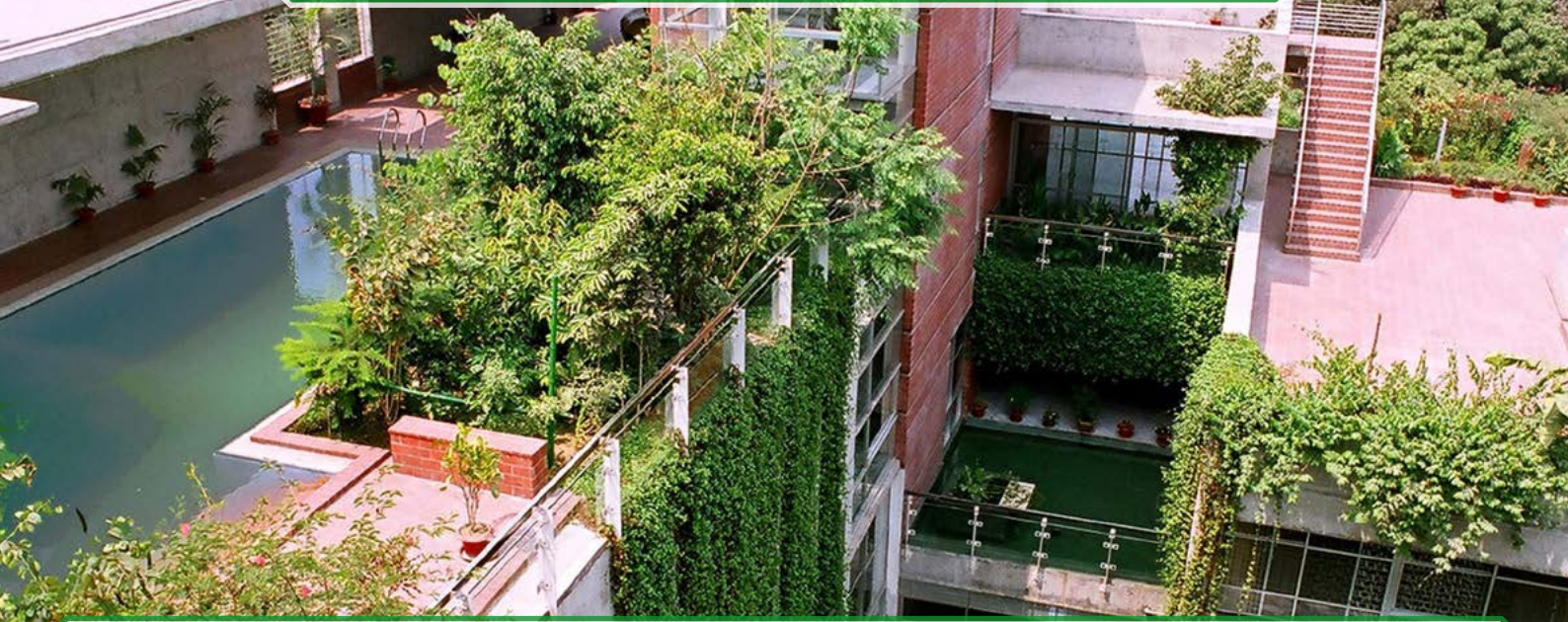
www.royalfloraholland.com

www.groenkennisnet.nl

Specific questions on topics such as reference projects, research results, etc. can be sent directly to joop.spijker@wur.nl.

Giving greenery its due

Greenery and Residential



Due to its many positive benefits, greenery deserves a prime position in the planning and budgeting processes of large-scale projects (new builds and renovations). In consultation with potential and existing clients, the tips below can help suppliers of vegetation to give greenery its due in residential environments.

STAKEHOLDERS

- All projects involve a variety of stakeholders: residents, property owners, tenants and lessors, the municipal authorities and many others who exert their influence on the decision-making process.
- Getting to know these groups will allow suppliers of vegetation (potentially in conjunction with partners) to eliminate possible objections and customise greenery to suit their needs.



TIPS

- Identify the relevant criteria – in addition to the desired appearance, also consider matters such as the available space, budget, and the social environment. Use this information to educate the stakeholders about the benefits of greenery, as provided by this document.
- Eliminate risks by providing comprehensive information on the initial investments required, including expenses such as setup costs (possibly do this in collaboration with other businesses or an architect).
- Also provide information on maintenance methods, frequency and costs. Help mitigate risks (e.g. by providing a maintenance plan), and do not forget simple matters such as watering!
- Community participation: involve the current or future residents directly or indirectly in the selection, application and implementation of green features. Allowing residents to help (with planting, etc.) gives a positive boost to involvement.

In addition to large-scale projects, there is also the 'individual' market, i.e. people furnishing and planning their homes and gardens. They can be alerted to the benefits of greenery in the living environment via the media, and at points-of-sale such as garden centres and online stores.

CREATE DEMAND

Nearly everyone has a home, which makes everybody the target audience for promoting the benefits of greenery via the media. In 'project-based' situations, associations of tenants, residents or home-owners can be approached. This can help create demand leading to concrete contracts. Council members and other parliamentarians are another potential intermediary group. For new-build or renovation projects, proactively approaching an architect or project developer is useful.

