



Liberation Garden, Domiz Camp  
Photo Credit: Dirk Jan-Visser

## Accidental Cities: The Challenge of Greening Refugee Camps

Alfonso Montiel, CEO, [The Lemon Tree Trust](#)

Forced to turn your back on a war torn home, you embark on a 10-day trek across freezing mountains and arid valleys with a child on each hand and a bag containing your remaining belongings. A canvas tent in the desert becomes your new home. Tents, spread out as far as the eye can see, house your new neighbours. It is 2012. Your name is Sami Youssef, a 33 year-old Syrian with a PhD in Agroecology and a young family. Your new home is Domiz refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Six years later Domiz is no longer just a place to seek safety and security; it's now home to 30,000 people. Domiz has schools, a hospital and a large

supermarket, even wedding dress shops. Children's laughter is a common sound, and neighbours are now friends and colleagues. Domiz, by accident, has become a city. Across a neighbouring continent in Bangladesh, reportedly the world's largest refugee camp, Kutupalong near Cox's Bazar, faces a similar fate. Now home to more than 1 million people, the camp is more likely to grow in population than to be rendered unnecessary any time soon. Hundreds of refugee camps around the globe reflect the same pattern. These accidental cities have similar challenges to cities in developing countries; however, their unfortunate proximity to war zones, means the prospects for residents establishing normal urban life are limited.

According to Stephanie Hunt, Founder of the Lemon Tree Trust: "Bakeries and shops help people to survive but trees and gardens remind people of home and help them come to terms with their new lives. They are crucial for improving the environment and creating a sustainable place to live." With support from Sami Youssef and a growing team of refugees, the Lemon Tree Trust is transforming refugee camps, one garden at a time. For many camp residents, having a small patch of garden is a significant source of solace and a connection with their previous life. Gardening produces beauty, engenders belonging, aids food security, and promises valuable and unique economic stimulation. The Lemon Tree Trust has

three main areas of activity. The foundation of our organization is the sponsorship of camp garden competitions to encourage individual refugees and families to establish home gardens and compete annually to win a prize. We also support the development of community garden spaces within refugee camps to grow food and flowers for redistribution to vulnerable families, utilizing greywater wherever possible for environmental sustainability. These community gardens offer a place for people to learn new horticultural skills and a place to meet regularly to socialize, share stories and support each other. Finally, we are developing small business enterprises run for and by refugees.



Garden Festival  
Photo Credit: Dirk Jan-Visser

By establishing garden-based businesses themselves, refugees are empowered to create opportunity and seek economic stability. In 2018 alone, the Lemon Tree Trust distributed over 40,000 plants and trees throughout refugee camps in Northern Iraq. We ran garden competitions across 5 refugee camps in the region, attracting over 1,000 entries.

camp design, encouraging camp management to build in urban agriculture, domestic gardens and camp “greening” infrastructure from the outset. We hope for everyone to see them for what they are, accidental cities, and to see residents like Sami as people capable of greening an entire city.

**Resource:**

The Lemon Tree Trust. <https://lemontreetrust.org>.

The Lemon Tree Trust aims to expose every refugee camp in the world to gardening through these core areas of activities. We hope to start similar projects in Syria and Uganda, with Jordan, Lebanon, and Greece also in the pipeline. We hope that the work underway in Domiz will help develop a “blueprint” for future



Aveen  
Photo Credit: Dirk Jan-Visser



Home Garden  
Photo Credit: Dirk Jan-Visser