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The urban jungle, an underexplored habitat for neglected and indigenous plant diversity

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Abstract

The Anthropocene, the current geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant influence on the Earth's environment, is marked by globalisation and urbanisation. These processes have led to severe biodiversity decline and climate change. However, paradoxically, due to the same processes, urban environments have become melting pots of biocultural diversity. Cities provide for the needs of their inhabitants and beyond, acting as sinks for natural resources. These resources are mobilised through global trade and sourced from diverse rural communities globally, transported, traded, and marketed within urban environments. The use and cultivation of plant species from different regions and associated with diverse cultures and traditions contribute to the accumulation of plant diversity in urban areas. Consequently, urban contexts contain both cosmopolitan and globally distributed plant species, as well as region-specific, sometimes endemic, and rare plant species that frequently remain unnoticed. When biodiversity levels are high within this melting pot, urban contexts can become hotspots of present biodiversity. This opinion paper advocates exploring the urban context as an incubator of biocultural knowledge on plant diversity, as well as the possibilities of taking advantage of the opportunities presented by this introduced biodiversity. We propose several topics that require attention, including research, conservation, education, digitalisation, and policymaking. We believe that the urban context offers a unique set of resources that can contribute to developing sustainable solutions to the challenges we face due to the impacts of the Anthropocene, such as losses of agricultural and biological diversity, the vulnerability of food systems, and the erosion of biocultural knowledge.

Keywords: Biocultural diversity, forgotten crops, indigenous food systems, indigenous knowledge, urban ecology, urban ethnobotany