Benefits of integrating vegetation into urban environments

- Roots help prevent soil erosion.
- Tree canopies provide shade and lower temperatures reducing the heat island effect during hot, sunny days.
- Vegetation provides habitat for birds and other wildlife.
- Flowering plants provide nectar for pollinators.
- Local fresh produce is more highly accessible.
- Urban residents interact more with nature and living systems, experiencing increased biophilia.
Urban Ecology and Greenspace in Tuscany

Humans have influenced both rural and the urban the environment in Tuscany for thousands of years. Integrating plants and elements of the natural world into urban environments is an important component of urban ecology. Planting vegetation can help to shade streets and reduce temperatures especially in a hot Mediterranean climate zone like Tuscany. Vegetation can help reduce run off by increasing permeable surface area during rain events. A diversity of plant species provides important habitat for wildlife and can create wildlife corridors connecting urban areas with the surrounding countryside. With increasing land use change over time, there will be a devastating impact on ecological diversity world-wide. As urban landscapes are expanding, and in Tuscany as forests are reclaiming abandoned land, habitat that supports diverse plants species are disappearing due to an increasing intensity of cultivation as well as entrenched cultural traditions. Ecological functions that native plants provide are critical for ecosystem health in both urban and rural areas. Flowering plants can also help attract beneficial insects and other pollinators, which are important for flower and fruit production.

Tuscan hill towns built centuries ago with stonewalls to keep residents in and foreigners out. These walls can act as a barrier to the surrounding nature of the countryside. Important greenspaces are vital to the health of urban ecological systems in Tuscan hill towns. Over time there are creative ways that community members have integrated greenspaces into their lives. After exploring the region, a typology of green space was created to try to categorize the diversity of ways that vegetation is integrated into urban communities in Tuscany. Some of the most popular forms of greenspace include; kitchen gardens, container gardens, rooftop gardens, community gardens, pocket parks, courtyards, public right-of-ways, as well as slopes and urban edges.

Siena, Italy: A productive community garden provides fresh produce and an opportunity for a microenterprise for residents of Siena.

Container gardens: Groupings of potted plants are commonly found in hilltowns throughout Tuscany.
Kitchen Gardens

Kitchen gardens are located very near an entrance to home. They are spaces used to grow culinary herbs, as well as vegetables. Salad greens, basil, parsley, sage, peppers, and tomatoes are examples of crops often found in kitchen gardens. These gardens are designed to provide easy access to small amounts of fresh produce.

Courtyards are located in publically and privately owned spaces. They may be walled in. There are often planted with trees and shrubs and sometimes have places to sit and relax. These spaces function as outdoor rooms and often inviting entrances to indoor spaces.

Container Gardens

Container gardens are great ways to add vegetation, color and texture to more stark urban environments with impermeable surfaces. Many Tuscans cluster pots of small trees, shrubs and flowering plants on sidewalks, in entryways, and on windowsills.

Community Gardens

Shared garden space to produce annual vegetables and fresh fruit are found throughout Tuscany. The larger gardens are often undeveloped lots with in the walls of a hill town. Historically some towns set aside land specifically for urban agriculture.

Public Right-of-Ways

Public right-of-ways are highly traveled areas of towns. Planting in parking strips, along parking lots, and sidewalks can greatly enhance the quality of a community. Streets are more attractive with trees and the canopies provide needed shade.

Pocket Parks

Pocket parks can provide places for children to play, quiet places to relax and reflect in the shade, as well as places for neighbors and tourists to gather. These are usually open spaces with trees, benches, and public art.

Slopes and Urban Edges

Often the areas with the most challenging topography are the last to be developed. Tuscan hill towns have long been neglected along the edges. Here you will find slopes with terraces for olives and other regional trees. There are also shrubs and weeds.