

Aukrust Gard, an island of cultivated land in Norway

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Nordgard Aukrust in Bøverdalen, Norway, August 2024

"Perceiving and developing landscape" was the topic of an anniversary event at Nordgard Aukrust in Bøverdalen, Norway in August 2024. Ola Aukrust took over the farm in 1986, converted it to biodynamic farming methods and created an island of cultivation here. For the PETRARCA seminar, observation exercises were led by Laurens Bockemühl, Angela Pfennig and Thomas van Elsen, while Ola Aukrust provided insights into the way he had developed the landscape. After the PETRARCA landscape seminar, Michael Straub, author and experienced adviser in

¹ Additional photos: www.instagram.com/sozialelandwirtschaft

the growing of medicinal plants, shared his wide knowledge about medicinal plants and their effects on human beings. Some of the species he described are used in tea mixtures for sale in the farm shop, some grow in the herb garden and others are cultivated or collected.



Michael Straub talks about the medicinal plants

A herb garden on the sunny side of the Bøvertal

"If there is a bakery, a dairy, a butchery – does this mean there needs to be a herb business too?" This is the question posed on the website of Nordgard Aukrust <https://aukrust-nordgard.no/>. The farm started processing herbs in 1992. In addition to the herbs grown on site, they process organic quality teas and herbal mixtures for Norsk Øko-Urt, an association of Norwegian herb growers. Thanks to the herb-growing specialisation at Nordgard Aukrust, there is a wealth of flowers and colours in this cultivated island in Bøvertal, where sunshine is missing from November to February.



Growing herbs on the fields near the river



Herb teas in the farm shop

Aukrust Gard operates on the "sunny side" of the Bøvertal in the rain shadow of the Jotunheimen mountain range. They receive an average of only 350 mm of precipitation, and in drier summers like this year they need to use the Bøvra mountain river for irrigation. Crops are grown on the fertile soils near the river; above this are meadows which have been painstakingly cleared of stones and boulders; and even further uphill are pastures with scattered birches, pines and juniper. Huge, often multi-stemmed birches spread their crowns as though in a

park. Uphill there is an open woodland of birches, pines and spruce all the way to the treeline. At this level are relics of an earlier irrigation system for collecting water from the mountain for the cultivated areas, at a time when there was no means of pumping the river water uphill.



*Northern wolfsbane (*Aconitum septentrionale*), wood ants and cleared stones*



Birches and juniper ...



... and species-rich unimproved grasslands

What we fail to notice remains undiscovered

We observed this sequence during the landscape week, starting with a collection of almost 30 species of arable wild plants growing between the cultivated herbs and including a few that are not present in Central Europe. And along the road we found a narrow strip of the reflexed saltmarsh-grass (*Puccinellia distans*), a salt-tolerant grass that reflects the winter road gritting in Norway as elsewhere. To identify plant species, to "speak to" them as the botanist might say, can be like reading the surroundings of each site because, beyond their momentary presence, they tell us about the conditions under which they grow. – This was linked to the development of the farm environment in a presentation on Ornamented Farms by Angela Pfennig from her perspective as a garden historian – "Connecting beauty and usefulness".



A surprising diversity of arable wild plants in the cultivated fields



*Aukrust Gard in the PETRARCA landscape book and reflexed saltmarsh-grass (*Puccinellia distans*) along the roadside – what we fail to notice remains undiscovered*

Across the high mountains to the Sognefjord

The seminar week was rounded off with an excursion into the mountains: from Lom across the high mountains of Jotunheimen to the west and past the Galdhøpiggen, at 2,469 m the highest peak in Scandinavia, then on to the Sognefjord and Norway's oldest stave church in Urnes (built 1130). Fruit trees and berry bushes thrive in the mild Atlantic climate of the fiords: Nordgard Aukrust gets its supplies of organically grown apples for its tea mixtures from here.



Jotunheimen – the lemming we spotted escaped the photographer



Urnes: the oldest preserved stave church in Norway



... and the stave church in Lom with the monument to the poet Olaf Aukrust



Much that happens on the farm is only possible thanks to the support of the many trainees. At the end of the seminar, it took little more than a day for the helpers from Austria, Belgium, France and Germany to harvest the strips of orange Calendulas: many hands make light work! The Calendula flowers are carefully dried

in boxes ventilated from below and can later be bought in tea mixtures. By the way, the high fence around the growing fields is to keep elk from eating the crop!



Calendula being harvested by an international team



Painting plants with Michael Straub



Plant observation of St. John's wort: botany and medical uses with Michael Straub

Looking back and to the future

Before the landscape week there was a book presentation on biodynamic agriculture in Norway with the authors Emil Mohr and Morten Ingvaldsen, followed by a concert by the Norwegian group Rosenrot. This centenary event for 100 years of the Agriculture Course in the Norwegian language was the prelude to the seminar week, which frequently gave the opportunity to look back to the past. In 1999, exactly 25 years ago, the "Practical week on landscape perception and design" run by the Natural Science Section at the Goetheanum was held under the heading of "The atmosphere of Norwegian landscape", with Jochen Bockemühl and over 70 participants, including a third from Norway². Since then, much has changed. The planned cultural centre for events, meetings, exhibitions, concerts and lectures has become a reality, as well as a large glasshouse. Ola and Franziska Aukrust, along with many helpers, have developed a diverse cultivated island which is a picture of the mindset from which to work on the care and development of the natural resources. Potential is taken up and developed further: the agriculture practised here is an example of ecological inclusion. In many social agriculture projects it is people in need of special care who open the door to this kind of ecological inclusion – here it is Ola Aukrust's enthusiasm for the herbs which have led to an economically viable specialisation. Twenty years ago a dissertation for the University of Witzenhausen planned a cheese dairy here, when the cows were still being milked. Instead, traditional dairy farming was changed to suckler cows, because running a cheese dairy AND herb business was too much

² van Elsen, T. (2000): Landschaft als soziales Ereignis. Eindrücke von der Landschaftswoche der Naturwissenschaftlichen Sektion in Norwegen (14 to 21 August 1999). Supplement to the periodical "Das Goetheanum" (newsletter 3/2000) 79 (3): 7-9, Dornach.

for a family with five children. But the farm therefore offers further potential for future generations.



Cultural centre ...



... and landscape temple under construction!