

INTERVIEW WITH KRISTINA BELL AND GRACE SWANSON, SPECIALISTS OF THE AFRICA AND MIDDLE EAST REGIONAL TEAM OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS



Kristina Bell



Grace Swanson

1. As organizers of the MENA Green Cities Study Tour, what were some of the main take away messages from the week?

Grace: Many people who are part of urban cultures in the MENA region shared that they had lost their knowledge and practices of the past, as it relates to engaging with nature. Especially in densely built and less fortunate neighborhoods, the urban lifestyle can cause significant indirect stress, and occupants will be more concerned with meeting basic needs than addressing environmental concerns. Urban forestry represents a luxury in these parts of the city. This is why programs that manage to address both food security and greening, through productive rooftop gardening for example, are even more important for these neighborhoods.

Kristina: In Cairo, NGOs, volunteerism and the culture of start-up business ventures play an important role in kick-starting rooftop gardening initiatives that may grow into larger movements. In Cairo, it also seems that there are many informal solutions that play an important role in building an urban gardening culture. Scientific data and the measurement of impact, which can be hard to come by, play an important role in spreading the message of the benefits of rooftop gardening. They might help with getting people to believe in change and to stay committed and engaged in a process of transformation into greener urban livelihoods.

2. What were some of the surprising elements of the tour – with regards to the projects you saw, the people you met, or the interaction of the participants?

Kristina: There are many unique, diverse and much-needed projects going on across Greater Cairo. I am very happy that I have been able to engage and assist some of these initiatives, while the US Forest Service has been able to provide the technical assistance needed with project implementation.

Grace: Despite there being some broad cross-cutting cultural similarities amongst the participants, it was interesting to observe the characteristics that make Egypt and Cairo unique. It was an exciting learning experience for those of us visiting from near and far.

3. At the end of the week, all participants presented action plans for what they thought they could do to advance urban forestry in their respective countries. How can these participants learn from each other and help each other succeed?

Kristina: As part of the presentation of action plans, we wanted the groups to offer solutions and recommendations to their colleagues, and this was great. This made the problem-solving process more engaging and seem more tangible and attainable. Also, some of these organizations are really good in areas where other people/organizations struggle, so we've encouraged those groups to connect and problem solve together.

Grace: There is a wealth of knowledge among the study tour participants, ranging from green roof technology to social media to volunteer engagement, and so many opportunities to learn from each other. It's great to be able to connect committed individuals from across the region who can collaborate and exchange with each other long after the study tour ends. We were happy to connect committed individuals from across the region who might be able to encourage each other's work in the future.

4. As part of your work at the U.S. Forest Service International Programs, you get to visit a lot of countries and projects. What is special about or specific to the Middle East that you think might be an asset in advancing urban forestry and rooftop gardening in the region?

Kristina: One asset I see is what others might see as a challenge – the lack of 'green' space, especially in urban areas. As a result of the arid climate, desert landscapes, and increasing urbanization, greening and urban nature seems oxymoronic, but, on the other hand, it gives these kinds of projects a lot of potential and visibility because they are so needed. People are desperate for green spaces to socialize, grow food, clean the air, and to look at and take pride in.

Grace: There are great organizations working on these issues in the region, and it was exciting to see so many represented in our group and during our site visits in Cairo. Everyone who joined the study tour came willing to explore new ideas, brainstorm with each other, and try something new when they returned home. We are excited to see them continue to inspire others and change their cities for the better.

5. What was your favorite dish you got to taste during the week?

Kristina: Out of a week of fancy hotel food and restaurant eating, my favorite meal was a home-cooked meal of my favorite Egyptian dish – Mahshi (stuffed peppers) in a small village outside Cairo by one of our site host's family. Delicious!

Grace: Every meal I ate was my favorite, but it was especially fun to try classic Egyptian koshari.

6. The interactions among our participants from Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt sometimes required Arabic-to-Arabic translation, due to the different regional dialects. What Arabic word did you learn during the week?

Kristina: I didn't learn this word, but I used it a lot – Yalla, because we always seemed to be late :)

Grace: Most of the other words revolved around food – the second most important part of the visit!