

# Atlanta Grows Lettuce in Freight Containers as Urban Farms Bloom

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Aug. 16 (Bloomberg) -- Designer lettuce will soon bud under the flight path of the world's busiest airport in Atlanta. An orchard is taking the place of a parking lot in Davenport, Iowa. And homeowners near downtown Denver are turning lawns over to farmers like Sundari Kraft, who plant, weed, water and harvest crops from their yards in return for a share of the bounty.

"People are sick and tired of mowing and fertilizing," said Kraft, author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Urban Homesteading," in an interview at her Denver home. "We have a stack of applications, enough to double what we do now."

From New York to Seattle, cities -- which the U.S. Conference of Mayors says account for 90 percent of the nation's gross domestic product -- are attempting to create jobs, foster economic development, feed impoverished neighborhoods and fill long-vacant lots by returning to their agrarian roots.

Kraft, 34, and a team of apprentices nurture tomato forests, white eggplants, rainbow chard and other genetically pure vegetables for 11 homeowners who live minutes from downtown. Kraft sells the crop at farmers' markets and to 30 families, who fork over \$450 for a 20-week supply.

The demand for locally grown produce hit a high point this year, fed by urbanites looking to save money as well as documentaries such as "Food Inc." and books including Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma," which explore industrial food production.

Alaska to Texas

More farmers are marketing their products directly to consumers than ever, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said Aug. 5 when it released its 2011 National Farmers Market Directory. The guide lists 7,175 markets, up 53 percent from 4,685 in 2008.

States experiencing the most rapid growth aren't in the West or Northeast, where the local-food movement germinated, the USDA found. The agency reported a 46 percent increase in markets in Alaska, and a 38 percent jump in Texas, Colorado and New Mexico.

"There's a major trend that has serious legs," said Matt Liotta, chief executive of PodPonics Inc., which will start growing watercress, arugula and other lettuce varieties hydroponically (in water, without soil) in recycled shipping containers on eight acres outside Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport in the next two months.

"Organic sales are up, fresh produce sales are up and per-capita consumption of lettuce is up," he said.

Not Enough Lettuce

PodPonics signed an 11-year lease at the Southside Industrial Park with a unit of the Atlanta Development Authority, Liotta said. The lease is below market rate, he added, because of the city's interest in the jobs that PodPonics will create. The company said it expects to hire as many as 30 workers.

Even though Americans are eating more lettuce, it's not enough. Only one in four residents meets federal nutrition guidelines for three or more vegetable servings a day, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control found in a 2010 study.

To combat escalating obesity rates, nutritionists are urging diners to fill half their plate with produce.

"The half-a-plate dietary guideline does cause us to look at our current production acreage and try to figure out: How do we get there?" said Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan in a conference call with reporters Aug. 5.

With only 2 percent of the nation's agricultural land used to grow fruits and vegetables, according to USDA statistics, there is opportunity for urban farmers to fill the gap.

New York City

City officials, nonprofits and universities are attempting to quantify urban farms' economic benefits to boost private and public funding as well as productivity.

In New York, the nonprofit Design Trust for Public Space is surveying farms in the five boroughs to create a citywide plan to support urban agriculture.

"If you talk to longtime observers, they say five or six years ago they knew every farm plot and everyone involved," said Jerome Chou, the trust's director of programs. "Now that's impossible. It's growing so fast across all sorts of racial, class and demographic lines."

Urban agriculture would grow faster if the federal government supported farmers' markets as it does large commodity producers, who receive billions in subsidies, said Jeffrey O'Hara, an economist at the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Union of Concerned Scientists, in an interview.

"Modest public funding for 100 to 500 otherwise-unsuccessful farmers markets a year could create as many as 13,500 jobs over a five-year period," O'Hara wrote in a study released Aug. 4.

Free Produce

City planners hope urban farms will also revitalize long-forgotten downtowns. To draw residents outdoors, Davenport officials plan to give away produce grown on public land.

In coming weeks, the city will transform a neglected inner-city parking lot into a fruit and nut orchard, vegetable garden and park space.

"It's a matter of rethinking what public spaces are used for," said Darrin Nordahl, Davenport's city designer and author of the book "Public Produce."

"Every park has landscaping, every plaza has landscaping," he said in an interview. "There is landscaping on our streets, grounds around schools and public libraries. Instead of doing everything ornamental, let's see if we can produce food on these lands."

Growing in Detroit

Restrictive zoning and farming laws in some states make it difficult for aspiring producers to get projects in the ground.

In Detroit, Hantz Farms set out to add to the city's thriving network of community gardens by building "the world's largest urban farm," on scores of trash-strewn vacant lots.

Its plans were slowed by a state policy that governs production guidelines for commercial farms, said Mike Score, the company's president.

The law didn't allow Detroit officials control over what agricultural activities might take place at Hantz's farm, Score said, requiring complex legal negotiations the company hopes to conclude in the next few months.

Hantz wants to purchase 200 acres in southeast Detroit from the city, where it hopes to grow Christmas trees. The company would eventually like to acquire the remainder of the 500-acre site to incorporate gardens and an educational indoor growing center, Score said.

Whether on public or private lands, community garden networks from coast to coast illustrate how urban farms benefit metropolises economically and socially, advocates say.

"People here are growing 24,000 pounds of food, everything from leafy greens to squash," said Barbara Finnin, executive director of City Slicker Farms, a decade-old nonprofit in Oakland, California, that's helped 170 inner-city families plant gardens in their yards.

"If things cost \$1.80 per pound-- multiplied by 24,000 -- people here are saving cumulatively over \$43,200 a year," Finnin said. "That's money that can be spent in different ways."

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