

The Big Idea

Q How can you create sustainable gardening on a college campus?

A With a used shipping container and students who care

BY KATHERINE PARKER

The concept itself started as a seedling.

What would it take to bring farm-to-table dining to the University of Oklahoma campus? Water. Nutrients. Seeds. And, as it turns out, a freight container. Mother Earth replicated inside four steel walls, producing a lush oasis of floor-to-ceiling vegetation. The result — fresh salads, garnishes and herbs — is proof that environmental sustainability is one very delicious dish.

Tucked behind Cate Center, a hydroponic garden grows inside a recycled freight container, capable of producing over 1,000 heads of lettuce each week. Since August 2016, OU Housing and Food Services has earned its green thumb while working to fulfill the university's commitment to the Real Food Challenge — a program that encourages participants to buy at least 20 percent real, local food by 2020.

"It's a step in the right direction. The garden is another way we can add to the community landscape and economy," says Executive Director of Food Services Frank Henry.

As soon as Henry saw the hydroponic garden (a garden that grows plants without soil) at a trade show, he knew it would be good for the OU campus. The payoff in healthy food and learning experience for any interested student would be worth the investment.

"When OU Housing and Food Services asked for our help, I thought, 'heck yeah, we would love to be a part of this.' We want to be a driving force in moving OU towards more sustainability and that's exactly what the garden does," says

Allyson Wiley, OUr Earth president and an environmental sustainability major. "It's really a wonderful opportunity, and we're so thankful to be a part of it."

Although controlled by an iPad that regulates light, temperature and nutrient distribution, this tech-savvy garden still needs a human touch. Student groups like OUr Earth are essential to its success. Wiley says that students plant seeds, transplant seedlings, prune plants, harvest the crops and clean the freight container. The complete cycle has been a learning experience.

Under the direction of Windeon McDowell, Housing and Food Services managerial associate, the hydroponic garden currently grows Butter, Edox, Red Crisp, Bambi and many more types of lettuce, along with kale and Swiss chard on 256 vertical towers. Wiley says the next step will be to experiment with cilantro, dill and arugula.

As of now, students who eat from the salad bar at Cate Restaurants can pile their plates high with leafy goodness that is undeniably fresh.

"The first couple of heads of lettuce that we pulled, we just tore the leaves off and ate them. People said, 'wow, it just tastes so clean.' And really it is because there are no pollutants from outside; no hot or cold weather variables. It's basically water and nutrients. And you can taste it," Henry says.

"It's exciting to know students are eating the produce that we're growing. That they like it and think it tastes great," adds Wiley.

However, for Wiley and every other gardener, the best part



Travis Caperton



OU students Allyson Wiley (left) and Emryl Lemmons prepare seedlings for transplant into one of 256 vertical towers constructed from rain guttering. Lighting, temperatures and nutrients are all controlled by iPads.

Travis Caperton

of tending to the freight container is not merely the taste of success. They find pride and motivation in the significant impact the hydroponic garden will have on OU's long-term sustainability and the environment.

"This really paves the way for sustainability on campus. I've been in a lot of student organizations over the past three years, and we've tried to make changes, but there have been a lot of roadblocks. So, to see something like this brought onto campus, something so awesome, it motivates me to do more.

"We're on a pathway to increase sustainability. And I hope the garden encourages more open-mindedness and more people to be interested in environmental clubs and to start to think about how they can make an impact," she says.

With a successful semester, the future for additional gar-

dens on campus looks bright. Henry says lettuce should appear in Union Market's salad bar soon and that Housing and Food Services is considering investing in one or two more containers, possibly located at the new residential colleges being built off of Jenkins Avenue.

"When OU Housing and Food Services asked for our help, I thought, 'heck yeah, we would love to be a part of this.'"

"We are really proud of how well this has done so far. And the best part is that we don't charge students any more for this. We are putting it out there as part of our regular business plan to give students local food, and we hope to continue to only grow from here," says Henry.

Katherine Parker is a freelance journalist living in Oklahoma City.