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Farming in the City; Is It Worth It?

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Farming in the city; is it really worth it? Across the country and around the world, gardens and farms are springing up in unlikely places: vacant urban lots, the tops of buildings, residential neighborhoods and even inside large warehouses. Why do we spend so much time and energy creating places to grow food in urban areas when there's so much uncultivated agricultural land still available in rural areas? The Seattle Urban Farm Company has been helping residents and businesses in Seattle grow their own food for the past six years, and despite the difficulties that come with urban farming, we're convinced of its benefits.



Consider our rooftop garden at Bastille Café and Bar: Bastille is a French bistro style restaurant in the heart of the Ballard neighborhood of Seattle. The 1,200 square foot garden was not easy to construct- it required a structural upgrade of the building and a serious reworking of the roofing membrane to protect the building from the damp soil and extra foot traffic. Materials were delivered through countless trips up a narrow set of stairs and thousands of pounds of soil were pumped up with the help of a massive blower truck. We built a complex irrigation system and installed an interchangeable set of greenhouse and shade covers to keep the vegetables happy throughout the year. It was a big project for us, and a leap of faith for the owners of the restaurant. Now that the garden has been in place and growing beautiful salad greens, herbs, and other produce for the last 4 years, we've been totally enthralled with it.

First, the usual lack of sun that plagues many urban farms is absent—the rooftop has full exposure to the east, south, and west, so the vegetables grow quickly and stay tender. This concept applies to rooftops in many cities: buildings often shade our prime ground level growing areas, but getting up on top of the buildings opens up a whole new realm of urban farming potential (especially true when a city has little or no arable land available).



Second, the connection between the growers and the chefs is unsurpassed. The chefs tell us what varieties of vegetables they want to cook with, and we help them decide what crops will taste the best and be most efficient to grow in the rooftop environment. We're able to experiment with both new and heirloom varieties that aren't commercially available, so they can expand their creative palette in the kitchen. The chefs take care of all the harvesting. This allows them to cut salad greens and pick French filet beans at the exact size and level of tenderness they desire. Once harvested, the produce goes immediately to the kitchen for washing, and is delivered to customers' plates that same evening. The ongoing involvement of the kitchen staff really gives them an appreciation for the trials and tribulations of farming- they get to see firsthand what happens when an unexpected pest shows up and demolishes a crop, and what it's like to spend hours kneeling to pick radishes and turnips. We find that it

also gives them a deeper appreciation for the food itself. Jason, the executive chef, tells us that he often will wait to see what crops are ready to harvest, and let that inspire what's on the menu for the week.



The best part of rooftop farming at Bastille is the connections it creates with the restaurant's customers. We lead tours of the roof every week, and visitors are always amazed that the produce they see growing in front of them will be on someone's plate later that evening. This inevitably leads us to discussing Bastille's commitment to sourcing the majority of their food locally. We're not able to grow all the produce the restaurant uses in the relatively limited space on the roof, so they fill the gaps by purchasing from the Ballard Farmer's Market (a Sunday market conveniently located right outside their front door) and directly from other sustainably minded farmers in the area.



For many people, actually seeing food connected to a living plant inspires a thoughtful consideration of where food is coming from, and what it takes to produce it. They realize that food is much fresher and tastes better when it doesn't spend weeks on a truck, and that spraying crops with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides really might be a bad idea. They also realize that growing food is fun: that it's worthwhile to stop running around for a few minutes each day and focus on pulling weeds from the garden or picking a basket of tomatoes and passing them out to a group of friends. We believe that this type of daily experience is the most essential element of urban agriculture. Growing food where people live and allowing them to experience the joys and heartbreaks of farming will ultimately lead to a population more educated about their entire food system and more prepared to make informed choices when purchasing food. When people are connected to the production of their own food, they are more likely to make decisions that favor their own health, the health of the community, and the health of the planet's ecology.

So, I hope you take a few minutes to consider giving it a try on an urban farm of your own. Whether you grow a little salad mix in your backyard or install a production greenhouse on top of your corporate headquarters, I think you'll be pleased with the results.

Brad Halm is a co-owner of the Seattle Urban Farm Company, a business that designs, installs, and maintains edible gardens and urban farms for families, schools, and businesses (www.seattleurbanfarmco.com). Along with business partner Colin McCrate, he authored the book [Food Grown Right, In Your Backyard: A Beginners Guide To Growing Crops At Home](#).