

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

By Alicia Robinson | arobinson@scng.com | The Orange County Register
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NEWSLOCAL NEWS

New demonstration farm at Orange County Great Park looks good enough to eat



Erik Cutter, Managing Director of Alegria Fresh at the Great Park in Irvine, holds a piece of Arugula as he talks about the zero-waste organic urban microfarm on Monday, June 10, 2019. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

The history of Irvine's Orange County Great Park is typically associated with the former El Toro marine air base.

But decades before the base was built during World War II, the land was covered with tilled fields and row upon row of lima beans.

Parts of the park have since returned to their agricultural roots, including the latest addition: a 2,000-square-foot demonstration farm that uses a system of raised planter boxes lined with soil held in rows by porous polypropylene "socks."

The \$20,000 project – a cooperative effort of the Great Park's Farm + Food Lab, organic urban farming company Alegria Fresh, and Bank of America, which helped fund it – grows about 25 to 30 different types of vegetables, herbs and flowers, including red-stemmed Swiss chard, kale in an array of greens and purples, and edible marigolds.



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Erik Cutter, Managing Director of Alegria Fresh at the Great Park in Irvine, talks about the zero-waste organic urban microfarm on Monday, June 10, 2019. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Colorful marigolds are an edible flower grown at Alegria Fresh's organic microfarm at the Great Park in Irvine. Monday, June 10, 2019. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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“Bright Lights” Swiss chard is grown at the Farm + Food Lab at the Great Park in Irvine. “I call this meat,” Erik Cutter, Managing Director of Alegr a Fresh said on Monday, June 10, 2019. “It’s like eating a steak,” because of all the protein it contains. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Heirloom Kale Lacinato is grown organically at the zero-waste urban microfarm, Farm + Food Lab, at the Great Park in Irvine. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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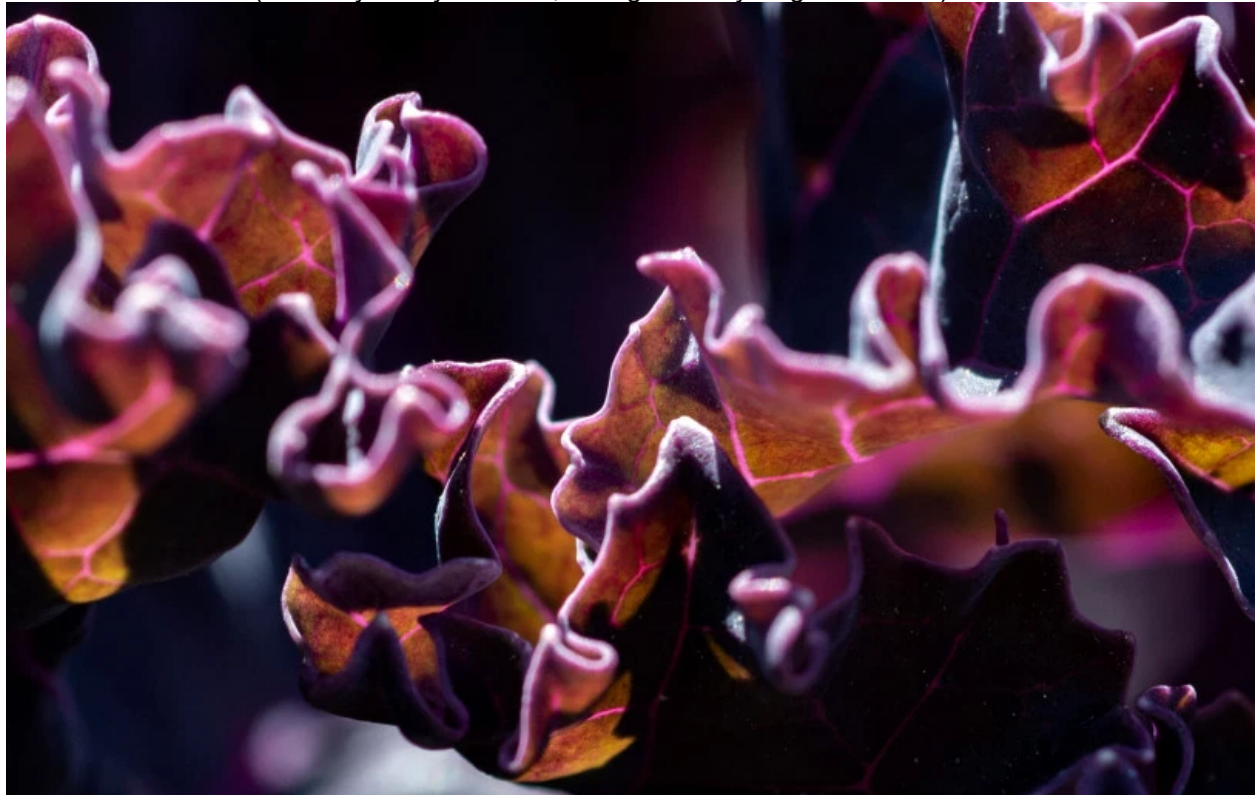
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Heirloom Kale Lacinato is grown organically at the zero-waste urban microfarm, Farm + Food Lab, at the Great Park in Irvine. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Heirloom Kale Lacinato is grown organically at the zero-waste urban microfarm, Farm + Food Lab, at the Great Park in Irvine. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Produce taking on an artful form is grown organically at the zero-waste urban microfarm, Farm + Food Lab, at the Great Park in Irvine. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Erik Cutter, Managing Director of Alegria Fresh at the Great Park in Irvine, holds a piece of Arugula as he talks about the zero-waste organic urban microfarm on Monday, June 10, 2019. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Salads made from produce grown at the Farm + Food Lab at the Great Park in Irvine are served to visitors on Monday, June 10, 2019. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Larisa Roznowski, a nutritionist and holistic health practitioner, dresses organic salads on Monday, June 10, 2019 with edible flowers, all grown at the Farm + Food lab at the Great Park in Irvine. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Chickens at the Farm + Food Lab at the Great Park in Irvine are fed organic lettuce left over from harvesting, as part of the zero-waste urban microfarm. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Erik Cutter, Managing Director of Alegria Fresh, invented the “SoxxBoxx Gro system that is used at the Farm + Food Lab at the Great Park in Irvine. The raised planters keep rats and other rodents away from the organically grown food. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

The “socks” are full of enriched soil that makes pesticides unnecessary, Alegria Fresh Managing Director Erik Cutter said during a tour of the farm Monday, June 10. The system also saves water by collecting it in the plant trays for reabsorption instead of letting it drain away.

Raised to about hip height on stands, the farm system is safe from rodents, easily moved, and it can be placed on any vacant lot, whether dirt or paved, Cutter said.

Cutter’s vision is for the urban microfarms to be set up in “food desert” neighborhoods where fresh produce is scarce, in places where families could work together to grow vegetables and feed themselves healthily. The exhibit of Alegria Fresh’s “SoxxBoxx” tray growing system is new to the Great Park, but there’s been active farming there for at least a decade, and former state agriculture secretary A.G. Kawamura, an Orange County native, has been working with Irvine on urban agriculture even longer than that.

Kawamura created the “Incredible Edible Park” on Harvard Avenue 20 years ago to help supply Second Harvest Food Bank with fresh produce for clients, and he’s been farming about 100 acres under a lease at the Great Park since 2010.

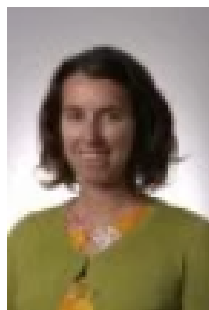
“The legacy of the El Toro marine base is it was the prized lima bean farm of James Irvine,” Kawamura said, so it’s fitting to return some of the land to growing food.

And even more soil could be turned to that purpose in the future. Irvine officials in 2017 approved plans for a future “full-circle farm,” proposed by Kawamura’s company, Solutions for Urban Agriculture. The city is paying Kawamura’s company about \$150,000 annually for the first two years to operate the Farm + Food Lab and the park’s urban agriculture programs; the contract amount decreases by 10 to 15 percent a year in later years.

That farm would create an “immersive experience” for visitors with row crops, a medicinal plant nursery, farming academy and kitchen/restaurant, all on property that’s restricted from other uses because it surrounds a still-operational air navigation system, said Nathan Gipple, the company’s senior director. Kawamura sees farming as an important part of the Great Park and its larger urban environment because while everyone eats, not everyone knows where their food comes from or how much work it takes to produce, he said.

“We thought it was pretty wonderful if the average citizen disconnected from their food supply could reconnect,” he said. “We continue to believe that there’s an incredible need and opportunity for agriculture at many different scales as a destination that people would want to visit and enjoy and participate in as a park experience.”

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Alicia Robinson

Alicia Robinson covers cities and local government for the Orange County Register. She has also reported at the Press-Enterprise in Riverside, the Daily Pilot in Costa Mesa, and at small daily and weekly papers in the midwest, before she became an honorary Californian based on hours spent in traffic. Besides government and policy, she's interested in animals both wild and domestic, people who try to make the world better, and how things work.

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