

Great Park farm a slice of urban agriculture

BY KIMBERLY PIERCEALL
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What would look like a small farm to anyone else is seen as the world's largest fresh salad bar to Erik Cutter, director of Alegria Fresh. For OC Produce's A.G. Kawamura, it's the future of agricultural urbanism.

On a half-acre at the Orange County Great Park, Cutter has installed rows of vertical planters bursting with beets, lettuce and strawberries and horizontal crops of basil, peppers and more all fed by a solar-powered hydroponic pump system. The 40 plants filling each vertical stand are "fat and happy" on 90 percent less water than it takes a typical field planting, he said. No pesticides are used.

Cutter calls it the "ultimate grazing ground" or an interactive urban farm, which had been in the Laguna Beach canyons until he moved it to the Great Park at a cost of about \$150,000, not counting his own time.

"What if this became the great supermarket at the

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Great Park?" he asks.

Cutter's vision for the farm and his partnership with OC Produce, one of the

region's largest commercial growers that leases about 100 acres at the Great Park, is to be a fresh-food destination for some of the thousands of residents soon to live nearby.

They could bicycle to one of several produce stands open every day selling tomatoes fresh from the vine and lettuce just plucked from the soil, or in his farm's case, ground-up coconut, he said.

Cutter said he wants to bring school groups from areas less accustomed to fresh foods and have them eat salad made from fresh-picked produce.

OC Produce's Kawamura already has been selling his freshly harvested produce, with help from Cutter, to local eateries, including restaurants at Pelican Hill, Lucca in Irvine and Bluewater Grill's James Ulcickas, who once bought hundreds of cases of heirloom tomatoes that would have otherwise been overripe by the time they reached store shelves.

Ulcickas said he added them to his restaurant's crab sandwiches, salads and more. He paid four times more than he would have for a hot-house tomato, but it was worth it to make a better meal, he said.

"We want to create a legacy and a platform for what 21st century agriculture is like," Kawamura said of his company's presence at the park.

Loma Linda University wants to use the produce in its cafeteria.

"Healing through food" is what Cutter and others gathered at the farm

Thursday for a tour called it.

But before that happens, he hopes to encourage more farming at the park, offer workshops and sell his farming systems – \$120 for a six-stack vertical tower – to residents looking for a backyard or side-yard gardening solution.

Visitors to the Solar Decathlon this weekend may spot salads being sold at a small farm stand across from a row of food trucks that feature produce raised nearby, not far from where teams of university students have built solar-powered homes, many with

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their own sustainable vertical gardens.

Cutter studied biochemistry and oncology but ultimately turned to business – starting an automotive design firm and a company that marketed luxury real estate around the world.

All the while, he was growing fresh produce in vertical planters at his home in Laguna Beach.

Three years ago, the recession prompted him to choose a new professional path, and so he focused on growing.

Ultimately, he said, he wants people to eat fresh food.

"If you can taste the difference, you remember the difference," he said.

For those interested in buying vertical planters or finding out about the company's upcoming plans, including workshops, visit alegriafresh.com.



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Erik Cutter, director of Alegria Fresh, washes one of the golden beets he's grown in a 5-gallon container.



Cutter stands among his herb crops at Alegria Fresh. He recently moved his operation to the Great Park.



Vertical gardens are lined up in planters at the **Alegria Fresh** farm. The planters are available for purchase.



PHOTOS: KIMBERLY PIERCEALL, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Rows of produce grow at the Alegria Fresh farm, set on a half-acre at the Orange County Great Park, where the balloon can be seen in the distance.



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Erik Cutter of Alegria Fresh shows the bounty of his half-acre hydroponic farm at the Orange County Great Park. Some crops are planted horizontally, others vertically.