

GROWING VERTICALLY IN O.C.

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Erik Cutter, managing director of Alegria Farm, maintains 120 towers of stacked hydroponic planters on about a half acre of land (soon to be a full acre) in the Great Park. He grows fruit, leafy greens, vegetables and medicinal herbs, working with grower/shipper Orange County Produce LLC.

Alegria Farm's vertical units are made of six to eight stacked interlocking pots, each holding about three to six plants rooted in coconut fiber. The towers are anchored at the bottom by a five-gallon pot planted with beets or kale. Drip lines run along the tops of the towers, using timers to disperse only enough water to trickle down through the containers and sufficiently feed the plants at the bottom.

"We're doing 52 plants in two square feet," says Cutter, 56. He hopes to teach the public how to grow for themselves in tight spaces.

Up in Brea, Chef Adam Navidi also grows basil, cilantro, spinach and other herbs and greens vertically inside a small portion of his giant Future Foods Farms greenhouses. He cultivates organic produce without pesticides using aquaponic growing systems, which rely on fish waste being converted into nutrients that infuse the water and nourish the plants.

The vertical units are 6- to 12-foot-tall food-grade pipes with about 10 plants sprouting from small holes. Water rises through the pipes via a siphoning system.

Navidi, 40, says when he discovered aquaponics, a light went off.

"This was the most natural, symbiotic relationship with growing food," he says.

