

PARTNERSHIP

Food bank plants a circle of kindness

Second Harvest and microfarm grow food, sell it, use money to buy food for needy

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In what was once the staff parking lot at Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County, a partnership is underway in which the result might be described as a benevolent circle packaged in a square box.

Produce sprouts from soil in row after row of planters, all elevated above the hot asphalt on waist-high rolling metal tables placed near the food bank's warehouse-sized distribution center in Irvine.

But this parking lot farm isn't producing just any produce, grown in any traditional way.



JEFF GRITCHEN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Erik Cutter, founder of Alegría Fresh, left, and Harald Herrmann, CEO of Second Harvest, stand among raised gardens at the Irvine food bank.

Yes, there are roots and dirt and water involved. Add some social enterprise, too.

What's different? A couple of key features.

The first is the process employed by Alegría Fresh, the agricultural company growing the food. Alegría's founder, Erik Cutter, describes that process as regenerative organic, zero-waste urban microfarming.

The second is how Second Harvest, the largest food bank in Orange County, is using what's being grown.

This weekly harvest won't be eaten by the thousands of needy people Second Harvest helps feed. Instead, the produce will be sold, and the money it brings

at market will be used to buy food for the organization's clients.

The seed money — literally and figuratively — for the Alegría SoxxBoxx Farm comes from a \$150,000 grant provided by Bank of America.

Alegría is growing nutrient-dense produce. The current mix includes several types of lettuce, bright green to deep red, as well as kale and Swiss chard. There are onions and celery; herbs, including basil, parsley, sorrel and fennel; and edible flowers. That's just what's in the raised beds.

Nearby, several varieties of tomatoes climb the wire fence that separates the 3,000-square-foot SoxxBoxx Farm area from

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the many trucks that rumble past to drop off or pick up loads of food at Second Harvest's warehouse. In all, 54 SoxxBoxxes are growing food.

Alegría Fresh employs its proprietary SoxxBoxx Gro System, which uses rows of long, socklike mesh tubes to hold the plants inside the raised beds. It is designed to recycle carbon, reduce the release of methane gas, save water, maintain a cooling air flow and fend off pests. The system is similar to that used in the marijuana industry.

"I readapted it," Cutter said.

Second Harvest begins selling the SoxxBoxx Farm produce this week through an online delivery service — at \$30 a box, plus \$8 delivery charge — through its newly created Living Farmstand initiative. The farm

is expected to provide 100 boxes a week for the first month or so, a number that will be calibrated as things go along. Delivery is on Fridays and, for now, is limited to a 10-mile radius of Second Harvest's location near Orange County Great Park. A 15-mile delivery radius is expected in July.

Here's the big payoff: The money made by selling produce will help Second Harvest, part of the national Feeding America organization, purchase other food products in bulk. Those groceries, ranging from nonperishables to dairy products, are bought at discount and distributed to people in need of assistance — a number that has exploded in recent months due to the coronavirus shutdown that began in March and is only now easing.

"We're literally growing food to buy food at seven times the power," said Harald Herrmann, chief executive of Second Harvest Food Bank Orange County.

That's a win, win, win, win, win, win, win.

Idea could spread

Herrmann and Cutter say their collaborative is a first of its kind to involve a food bank growing food to sell food to buy food.

Through about 300 partner organizations in its food distribution network, Second Harvest delivered nearly 26 million pounds of food last year. Clients include children living in poverty, seniors on fixed incomes, and those who struggle with homelessness, disabilities and other issues that can fuel food insecurity.

The project managers hope that the farming experiment underway in the Second Harvest parking lot will be repeated by other food banks, and by individuals and organizations in urban neighborhoods who bear the unfortunate designation of "food deserts" because of a lack of nearby, dependable access to fresh,

nutritious vegetables and fruits.

Since 2016, Bank of America has provided \$50,000 grants annually to Solutions for Urban Agriculture to collaborate with Alegría Fresh on urban regenerative farming projects. The SoxxBoxx Farm-Living FarmStand project is bearing fruit from that investment.

"This is the first urban regenerative microfarm, now moving from pilot phase to actual full concept," said Shari Battle, Orange County market manager for Bank of America, who oversees community relations and cultivates partnerships in the area.

"It can be used in urban deserts anywhere."

Cutter, who used Google to do his research, estimates that there are 40 square miles of unused or underutilized man-made surfaces in Los Angeles and Orange counties, where rolling, raised farm beds could be set up and

maintained. He envisions educational programs to teach children how to become plant doctors and to turn poor communities into their own sources of nutritious food. He sees his farming ideas taking root in homeless shelters and in prisons.

Cutter's focus — on developing a farming method that doesn't require acres of wide open land and doesn't over-tap scarce and costly water supplies — is partly philosophical and partly practical.

His bio says he has a background in biochemistry and oncology; his farming methods are all about adaptability, sustainability, zero waste, and producing food that boosts immunity — a critical factor in fighting the coronavirus.

Cutter works a 1.5-acre lot at the Farm Lab in the Great Park, about a mile from Second Harvest. There, 30 SoxxBoxxes add to the food grown for Living FarmStand, along with

composting bins that produce the "bio-rich" soil generated from discards and worms at work. (That's where the regenerative organic part comes in.)

The current SoxxBoxx Farm operation can provide a projected 300,000 pounds of fresh produce a year for the Living FarmStand. The cultivars in one box can be quickly turned into a salad that feeds up to six people.

Herrmann hopes to develop a sustainable and expanding subscription delivery.

"This is our victory garden," he said. "We brought this to life during a crisis."

How to order

Living FarmStand orders must be placed weekly by noon Thursdays. Cost is \$30 for a box, with additional delivery charge.

For more information, go to feedoc.org/living-farmstand. Questions can be emailed to livingfarmstand@feedoc.org.