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On Food: Farm + Food Lab's micro-farm is growing 'healing food'

By BRADLEY ZINT

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Erik Cutter, the managing director of Alegría Fresh, speaks about his company's SoxxBoxx system and how it's being used in the Farm + Food Lab's zero-waste "regenerative organic" micro-farm in Irvine. (Photo by Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

The Farm + Food Lab in Irvine is home to a project that organizers say is Southern California's first zero-waste urban "regenerative organic" farm.

Thanks to a \$20,000 grant from Bank of America, Farm + Food Lab visitors can see how this micro-farm is making nutrient-dense vegetables in ways much of O.C. and Southern California can replicate.

The key to that success is the SoxxBoxx Gro System, an elevated tray containing rows of polypropylene socks filled with rich soil. The plants grow inside the socks within ideal conditions that retain water and keep cool temperatures even on hot days.



Alegría Fresh's SoxxBoxx growing system is at Irvine's Farm + Food Lab's micro-farm and in the Laguna Niguel senior community. (Photo by Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

The trays come in 4x4, 4x8 and 3x6. A 4x8 tray would retail for around \$1,000.

During a recent tour of the micro-farm, Erik Cutter, managing director for Alegría Fresh, which designed, owns and maintains the SoxxBoxx system, noted how it also sequesters carbon and blends organic, aeroponic and hydroponic practices. The plants grown have such a strong immunity system that they don't require pesticides, Cutter added.

“If you ate vegetables like these, you wouldn’t be deficient,” he said. “That’s why I say we’re growing healing food.”



An organic salad with edible flowers, beet leaves, arugula and Swiss chard at the Farm + Food Lab’s zero-waste urban micro-farm. (Photo by Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

The micro-farm has been in place since January. Its most recent crop took about six weeks to grow.

“We’re thrilled to bring in new exhibits, a new demonstration and new technology that gives a better idea of what we can do,” said Nathan Gipple, senior director of Solutions for Urban Agriculture, an Irvine-based group that manages and programs the Farm + Food Lab.

The SoxxBoxx system can also be found in a Laguna Niguel senior community but the folks behind the micro-farm are looking to grow SoxxBoxx into many more locations.

“Imagine all these empty lots in Orange County with something like this,” said Shari Battle, Bank of America Orange County’s senior vice president, market manager.

For Bank of America, Battle added, the project helps achieve the bank’s environmental goals. It would also create sustainable, living-wage jobs for people tending and selling from their own SoxxBoxxes, she said.

SoxxBoxxes are so mobile that they could basically go anywhere, Gipple noted. “The flexibility of the model is really the exciting thing,” he added.

“You’re going to get healthier by eating anything in this dirt,” Cutter said.

IF YOU GO

What: SoxxBoxx Gro System at the Farm + Food Lab

Where: 14280 Cadence, Irvine (at The Great Park)

When: Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Information: (949) 724-6247; cityofirvine.org

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Bradley Zint left Times Community News in 2018. He was a general assignment reporter for the Daily Pilot, where he worked since 2010. At the Pilot, he also was a copy editor, classical music columnist and reporter covering Costa Mesa and Newport Beach. He previously worked in Hermosa Beach, Long Beach, Alaska and Massachusetts. He is a graduate of Cal State Long Beach, where he served as editor-in-chief of its campus newspaper, the Daily 49er.
