

Tending the crops sends urban farmers to the roof

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Apprentices Eric Hussey (left) and Christopher Braun weed a kale garden and thin lettuce plants on the rooftop garden of McCormick Place in Chicago, Illinois, June 2, 2015. The garden is managed by Windy City Harvest, a sustainable agriculture program out of the Chicago Botanic Garden's Urban Agricultural Department. Photo: Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune/TNS

CHICAGO, Ill. — For more than 10 years, Chicago has been a leader in the green-roof movement to add gardens to the roofs of buildings. Now the city is ready to take an active place in the next environmental push — using rooftops to grow food. It is a movement that is sparking interest in cities nationwide.

Rooftop farms are sprouting all around the city. The McCormick Place convention center has grown tens of thousands of pounds of produce since 2013.

Likewise, a historic Pullman neighborhood factory is expected to have the world's largest rooftop garden when it is completed this summer. Even small businesses and schools have them in Chicago.

Other Cities Join The Green List

It is too early to tell what kind of effect rooftop farming could have on food production. The idea is still very new.

Peter Strazzabosco works for the city of Chicago. He believes there are at least 13 rooftop farms in the city, although he said there could be more.

Other cities are known for being green too. Washington, D.C., has three rooftop farms and Toronto, Canada, has two, according to officials in those cities.

Michael Bryson, a professor at Roosevelt University, said the discussion of sustainability is important. He believes agriculture inside cities can help us to improve how we grow and distribute food.

Rooftop farms make sense in Chicago. It already had many rooftop gardens and is a city known for being green, Bryson said.

"Chicago has really embraced" the "practice of city farming," he said.

Windy City Leads The Way

The former mayor of Chicago, Richard M. Daley, got the idea after seeing a rooftop garden on a trip to Germany. He returned with a mission to turn Chicago into a green-movement leader. He built the city's first green roof atop city hall in 2000.

In the years since, green roofs have gotten a lot of attention. Chicago has been recognized as one of the leaders in North America. The city has more than 5.5 million square feet on more than 500 rooftops, said Strazzabosco of Chicago's city government.

Even that is still a small number. Those 500 green roofs represent a little less than one-tenth of 1 percent of Chicago's 500,000 buildings. Experts in Germany say that about 15 percent to 20 percent of the flat roofs in that country are green.

There are no figures for the overall number of green roofs in North America. But it is known that Washington, D.C., has been adding them quicker than others over the past four years.

Washington officials said the city has 2.3 million square feet of green roofs. Philadelphia reported more than 1 million square feet.

It's All In The Timing

Chicago wanted to promote city farming, so in 2011 it passed a law allowing rooftop farms to be built in the city.

Now Gotham Greens, a company from New York, is set to open a rooftop farm in August in the Pullman neighborhood of Chicago. The company says it will be the world's largest.

It will be built on top of a factory used by Method, the eco-friendly soap company. Method began a partnership with Gotham Greens last spring. When the farm opens, it will span 75,000 square feet, or nearly 2 acres. It will yield produce equal to a 40-acre farm, Gotham Greens CEO Viraj Puri said.

Chicago's green approach, as well as good timing, helped bring the company to the city, according to Puri. Gotham Greens was looking for a place in Chicago, and Method reached out and suggested a partnership.

Like New York, Puri said, Chicago provides an opportunity to build upward.

New York officials said they did not know how many green roofs there are in their city. However, Gotham Greens already has three commercial rooftop farms in New York. They have two 15,000- and 20,000-square-foot operations in Brooklyn. They also have a 60,000-square-foot rooftop in Queens that will begin crop production this year.

Longer Growing Season

An improvement in technology has also contributed to the growth of rooftop farms.

At Method, a greenhouse will have sensors. They will be able to track temperature, light, carbon dioxide and oxygen. This removes the problems of plants growing in cities like Chicago with cold winters. A computer system will be used to adjust those levels as necessary.

Puri said Gotham Greens chose leafy greens to farm locally because they can spoil quickly. They do not store as well as other vegetables either. Both of those reasons make them a good choice to be grown locally, instead of shipped in from far away. The greens will be sold to local stores, restaurants and farmers markets.