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Module

10. Bay Area Urban Farms: Spiral Gardens & Top Leaf

Module Progress: 

Background Material

Spiral Gardens

The videos below may also be found on the [beautiful multi-media website](#) produced by UC Berkeley Journalism graduate students. In addition, check out Spiral Garden's [official website](#).



spiral gardens produce

from **Oakland North**



love garden

from **Oakland North**



Spiral Gardens

from **Oakland North**

Top Leaf

The article that follows is modified from an Edible East Bay article called [The Rise of Rooftop Farming](#) by Sarah Henry that features [Top Leaf Farms](#).

For all the cred that Berkeley and Oakland get as farm-friendly cities, rooftop gardens have never really been much of a thing here. Of course, East Bay urbanites have a little more land to work with than New York city slickers, with their sky-planting hubs in Brooklyn and beyond.

Top Leaf Farms may change that equation. The for-profit business, founded by seasoned farmer Benjamin Fahrer, is set to operate two rooftop production farms atop apartment complexes, one in each town. If these prove successful, more living rooftops producing food for residents and restaurants may follow.

“Nonprofit urban farms have access to grant money or startup funds for their mission-driven projects,” says Fahrer, whose vibe is more community-based,

chillaxed coastal farmer than edgy, urban edible entrepreneur. “A for-profit farm is challenged in that regard. So without a lot of initial investment, we’re going to start small and build as we prove our model can be profitable.”

A Farm Grows in Berkeley

Berkeley’s first commercial rooftop farm is slated to open in August. The Nautilus Group development at 2201 Dwight Way has just over 12,000 square feet of farm space that Fahrer helped design and install. He will operate it under a long-term lease agreement. At press time, the site was still under construction. But the 236-bed, 77-unit, module-based student housing project is expected to be completed in time for UC Berkeley students to move in at the start of the school year. And both the farmer and builders are confident that an enriched soil medium for the farm plots will be in place when classes start. The building’s basement includes a farm-related room designed to house a walk-in cooler, washing station, salad greens spinner, and areas for sorting, drying, and processing produce. Total tab for the onsite farm infrastructure and equipment: \$318,000, according to Fahrer.

The project, dubbed Garden Village, includes 16 individual rooftop produce plots connected by walkways. Hedgerows planted on the perimeter will serve as windbreaks and attract beneficial insects. Fast-growing, light-weight crops, such as leafy greens and herbs, will fill the farm beds. Fahrer estimates that the project will produce 10 tons of food per year and generate about \$110,000 in annual sales once the farm is fully up and running. “The opportunity here is immense,” says the 41-year-old who has grown food for the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in Carmel Valley, Ocean Song Farm and Wilderness Center in Sonoma County, and Esalen Institute in Big Sur. “There are lots of rooftop farming operations in this country, yet no one else is doing this kind of a commercial farm in the Bay Area.”

To prevent waste, Fahrer plans to harvest daily and to customers' order. Residents will have access to produce through an onsite farm stand, slated to be located on the building's common decks. Fahrer wants to offer residents a CSA-style produce service and hopes to include offerings from rural farms to complement what he grows. He also intends to find customers close to the farm. "There are 448 restaurants and cafés within a three-mile radius of our Berkeley farm," he says. "The potential to move this produce is great."



Top Leaf's proposed rooftop commercial production farm, as imagined by an illustrator.

Oakland rising

The second rooftop farm for Top Leaf is about three times the size (and budget) of the Berkeley project. The planned private living roof is part of another Nautilus Group building. This one is a long-anticipated, multi-use development slated for construction soon at the prime corner location at 51st Street and Telegraph Avenue in Oakland's way-past-gentrified Temescal neighborhood. The site at 5110 Telegraph is expected to include 204 residential, mostly market-rate rental units

(11% will be set aside for affordable housing). The five-story property will also feature ground-level retail, including a grocery store and other food-related businesses and a publicly accessible greenbelt.

That's all to come. The space, a fallow, empty lot surrounded by a chain-link fence for almost 20 years, is currently being used as Top Leaf's seed farm and nursery under a city-approved temporary urban farm permit. In just a matter of months, the large, formerly vacant spot has sprung to life. A greenhouse is chock full of starts, including 40 varieties of lettuce, eye-catching standouts such as Camo Oakheart, Hyper Red Rurple Waved, and Jester. Also under the roof: more than a dozen different kales and several versions of popular herbs such as basil, mint, and thyme. The ground features rows of vibrant greens a few weeks shy of harvesting. Sunflowers line the perimeter.

Fahrer is playing in the amended dirt to see which edible plants do best in this particular microclimate. And he's also saving locally adapted seeds for future use. He already has nibbles from local chefs interested in purchasing his sprouting produce: neighbors Charlie Hallowell of Pizzaiolo, the cooking crew at Sacred Wheel Cheese Shop, and Jerome Fressinier of Uptown's Picán, who has known Fahrer for years.

"Benjamin understands soil, seeds, and the mineral and sugar content of plants in such a way that you can taste the difference in his produce," says Fressinier. He's not just a good grower, says the Uptown chef. "He has always paid close attention to both place and people in the ecosystems he creates. I think his kindness, openness, and incredible knowledge will help make this business a success," adds Fressinier. "He's always a couple of steps ahead in terms of growing produce that isn't readily available. I look forward to buying from him."

Through a crowd-sourced funding appeal via farm-focused Barnraiser, Top Leaf netted over \$15,000 to pay for the greenhouse, farm supplies, soil, and seeds. Some of the starts will be transferred to the Garden Village site.



Seed saver and greens grower Benjamin Fahrer, founder of Top Leaf Farm, in his pop-up greenhouse in Oakland. A year or so from now, Fahrer will take his farm to the roof. (Photo by Michelle Magdalena, michellemagdalena.com)

Taking it to the roof

Once the developer's permits are approved, Fahrer will decamp until the complex is built. He's hoping to relocate his pop-up farm operation to another vacant lot in Oakland. And he's in discussions with local nonprofit farming organizations around public/private partnerships for both the short-term temporary farm site and for the long-term permanent farm. While current projections call for him to begin farm production at the built-out Oakland site in the summer of 2018, Fahrer says

that realistically he's shooting for the spring of 2019, given inevitable delays on construction projects.

For Fahrer, Top Leaf Farms is a no-brainer: "We need to grow more food where people actually live," says the 20-year organic, biodynamic farmer and avid seed saver who grew up along the Big Sur Coast. "Our cities are growing, our climate is changing, and we need to get creative." As higher-density living becomes an increasing reality around the Bay, rooftop farming just makes sense, he says.

Fahrer would still be farming in rural settings if not for love. He relocated to urban digs with his wife Rupa Marya, an internal medicine physician at the University of California in San Francisco. He simply transplanted his desire to grow food with him. Itching to have his own urban farm, Fahrer started Top Leaf Farms in 2014. Marya, meanwhile, wears many hats: Aside from her medical career, she's the lead singer of Rupa & the April Fishes, a world music band with a social activist slant. And she's an active partner (and co-owner) who enjoys digging in the dirt at Top Leaf Farms. The couple live in Kensington with their young son. Bija Milagro frequently accompanies Fahrer to the farm and has opinions about what Dad should do on site, as many three-year-olds do.

The Oakland farm location has had a rich history. Perhaps its most notorious manifestation was as the X-rated Pussycat Theatre, which one resident described as "a Milk-of-Magnesia pink edifice with red-lettered marquee listing the current feature: 'Satan was a Lady,' 'Motel Confidential,' and 'Ecstasy Girls.'" Prior to its porn-theater heyday, the venue, then known as the Tower, was a favorite for students and fans of art-house and foreign films. Damaged by the 1989 earthquake, the theater was demolished in 1998. The adjacent lot had formerly housed a bank and a video store before it was recently torn down to make way for the pending development project.

In 2000, the site hosted an arts project, along with an exhibit on the neighborhood's history. But mostly it's been an empty space: rented out in the fall as a pumpkin patch, and come December as a Christmas tree lot. The city approved a proposed apartment unit development on the site several years ago, despite community opposition to high-density dwellings, but then the recession hit and the projected fizzled. Into this void came the Nautilus Group, which in the last few years acquired two other sites in the area for housing projects.

Interestingly, Nautilus Group president Randy Miller signed a voluntary condition of approval for the project, agreeing to meet specific equity objectives. The letter, presented at an Oakland Planning Commission meeting in June, pledges community involvement: local business owners represented in the retail space, local hiring in the retail level food businesses, and a "best effort made to avoid additional displacement of Oakland communities," meaning residents of color, particularly African Americans, as well as long-term and low-income community members.

It's unclear just what that last objective might actually mean in this neighborhood. Temescal is a sought-after location for San Francisco rent-hike refugees and others with means, and has the real estate prices to prove it. Fahrer says he wants neighborhood residents to have access to healthy, affordable food and urban ag education. But the farm, as conceived, is a private commercial undertaking. "I think it may be a challenge to actually have impact in the way that is needed with this model, given the rate of displacement and lack of affordability in the neighborhood," says Esperanza Pallana, former director of the Oakland Food Policy Council, who is serving as a consultant to Top Leaf. "In his heart, Benjamin wants a project like this to be community based." But that's somewhat at odds with a production farm designed as a business.

The two ideals need not be mutually exclusive. And there's even a model in his backyard for doing both. For the past three years, Pizzaiolo and sister restaurant Penrose on Grand Avenue have held Sunday Supper fundraising dinners for nonprofits such as Oakland Leaf, City Slicker Farms, and Planting Justice.

“This is a new way of growing food in the city,” says Fahrer. “I’m exploring all kinds of ways that this kind of alternative, urban farm production can add value to all residents and community members. If this model is successful, we can grow more farmers and develop worker-owned rooftop farm cooperatives.” His ultimate goal: to grow enough produce so everyone in the city can eat food that has been harvested the same day it was grown. Fahrer is reaching for the sky, in more ways than one.

Reflection Questions



10. Top Leaf & Spiral Gardens

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