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Rooftop garden at NJIT student center encourages students to eat organic

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Executive chef and NJIT food services director Peter Fischbach with NJIT's new organic garden on the roof of the student center. (John O'Boyle/The Star-Ledger)

[Rooftop garden at NJIT gallery](#) (4 photos)



NEWARK — The kale plants growing on the roof of the student center at New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark are still a few weeks away from being harvested, but campus chef Peter Fischbach already knows what he will do with the vegetables.

Fischbach plans to braise the freshly picked leafy greens with onions and bacon and serve them three floors below to students in NJIT's dining hall.

"There's no better feeling than to be able to start your food from seedling and watch it mature all the way up to the perfect, ripe, beautiful fruit," Fischbach said.

The kale is one of more than a dozen organic vegetables taking root in a new rooftop garden in the center of NJIT's campus in downtown Newark.

The plan is to turn the vast roof of the student center into a mini-farm that will supply fruits and vegetables for the 9,000-student public university.

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NJIT is one of several New Jersey colleges and universities experimenting with growing their own organic food. Kean University in Union Township and Fairleigh Dickinson University in Florham Park recently started similar organic gardens. Seton Hall University and Bergen Community College are talking about joining the trend within the next year.

All of the schools like the idea of providing their campus with locally grown food while also creating a living classroom for students to study the science of organic gardening, said Julianne Aiello, director of sustainability and marketing for Gourmet Dining, the food service company that oversees the dining halls at NJIT and other area colleges.

"This is local. This is our space. This is a place where we can decide what we want to grow and how we want to grow it," Aiello said.

The gardens also appeal to the growing number of college students who are joining the organic movement and pushing their schools to provide more pesticide-free and locally grown food. At NJIT, signs in the dining hall will alert students to local produce.

"There's really no more local place than the rooftop," Aiello said. NJIT planted a prototype garden two years ago to see if anything would grow amid the solar panels on the sunny, windy rooftop of the student center. When all of the test vegetables grew well, the school invested about \$6,000 to construct 120 square feet of raised planting boxes, an irrigation system and a custom soil mix.

With the help of a local gardening consultant, the school planted a late-summer garden of collard greens, beets, lettuces, carrots, turnips and other vegetables. Most of the produce will be ready to harvest within the next month. Each bed should be enough to produce a side dish to feed 50 people, Aiello said.

As soon as the weather warms again, NJIT plans to plant tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini and other vegetables. If the garden is successful, campus officials hope to eventually expand the project into a rooftop farm of 2,000 square feet or more.

NJIT plants organic garden to feed students



John O'Boyle/The Star-Ledger

Executive chef and NJIT food services director Peter Fischbach talks about the school's new "steamed to perfection" food bar that will be stocked with items from NJIT's new organic garden on the roof of the student center .

NJIT's gardeners will team with the university's biology department to collect data about the plants, weather, soil, wind, pests and other growing conditions. Eventually, the data could help other urban gardeners make the most of their rooftops, said Fischbach, NJIT's executive chef and food services director.

"When you think NJIT and you think downtown Newark, you don't think garden. You don't think beautiful, vibrant fruits and vegetables growing on rooftops," Fischbach said. "That's something we want to educate people on."

NJIT's dining hall already includes stations where students can steam or stir fry their own food. But some undergraduates — who pay between \$1,500 and \$4,350 a year for their dining hall meal plans — were skeptical about eating produce grown on a roof in the center of the state's largest city.

"It's the middle of the city and you've got all sorts of stuff in the air," said sophomore industrial engineering major Erin Morris, 19, of Maryland. "If they truly are organic, then that's great. But variations of that can get a little sketchy."

Chemistry major Gechi Ukaegbu said she will try the campus-grown vegetables. But she and her classmates will still be tempted by the college student staples — pizza and hamburgers — on the other side of the dining hall.

"I like my fries," said Ukaegbu, 19, of Union Township.