Going Green on Governors Island
An Urban Farm and Composting Center Combine to Produce Fresh Vegetables

Among the many attractions a visit to Governors Island can provide is a visit to an 8,000 square-foot urban farm situated next to a composting center with chickens, goats, rabbits and beehives. Together they form a rural oasis that is open for gardening workshops, tours, activities for children and families, volunteer opportunities, and free field trips for NYC public school and summer camp groups.

The farm grew out of a longstanding commitment to community gardens by GrowNYC, the organization that runs the city's greenmarkets. As described by Shawn Connell, the Program Manager of the Governors Island Urban Farm, "We are proud to have helped build some of the first community gardens in New York City, where there were just vacant lots. Building on our efforts to create and maintain green spaces in the city, we wanted to work with children, encouraging good stewardship and positive attitudes towards food, through the garden.

"GrowNYC started this kind of free programming for public school students on an urban farm that we helped build on Randall's Island. In a matter of just a few years, our programs had become so popular that we had a waiting list that was 400 schools long! In the summer of 2013 we began looking for new sites to develop an urban farm so that we could continue to meet the growing demand for this important program. Governors Island has been in the process of developing a 40-acre park on the southern portion of the island, and our vision of creating a public urban farm fits well with the plan that they already have in place. Last
winter, we approached them with the idea of creating the farm and they loved the idea. Construction on the new farm began in April of this year and the farm began hosting school groups and the public in June."

The farm now has 20 vegetable beds, a gourd tunnel, fruit trees, a bean teepee, and an outdoor kitchen. Mr. Connell explains, "We grow five dozen different varieties of fruits, vegetables, greens, herbs, and flowers. We plant and cultivate everything that we grow by hand and use only organic growing methods, which means that we do not use any artificial fertilizers, herbicides, or pesticides. All of our edible plants are grown in raised beds made from recycled plastic lumber and filled with clean soils that are free of harmful heavy metals and other contaminants."

None of the fresh produce finds its way to farmers markets, since it all gets consumed on-site by visiting school groups. "When students visit the farm, they rotate through stations where they have the opportunity to help plant, weed, harvest, and then prepare what they have harvested in our farm kitchen. At the end of the visit, we all sit down together and eat what they have cooked."

It can be a transformative experience for some of the visiting youngsters, "In many cases our students are trying a fresh green bean or a cucumber for the first time when they visit the Urban Farm." Mr. Connell, who, together with his wife, previously ran a small organic farm in Maryland and sold their produce at three local farmers markets, learned that most of their customers wanted familiar varieties of produce that taste good. As he says, "Rainbow-colored carrots and exotic heirloom squash are fun to eat (and a joy to grow), but nothing beats the wonderfully balanced sweet and acidic notes of a perfectly ripe bright red tomato, or the crisp juicy texture and sweet nutty complexity of a good orange carrot."
Therefore he chooses flavor over exoticism when choosing what to plant at the urban farm. "By growing and serving the most flavorful varieties of produce to visiting schoolchildren, we are making sure that the experience of eating healthy is a positive one and something that they want to make a habit of doing. That being said, we are also growing purple carrots and silly-looking squash, because eating healthy should be a fun experience too!"
Nearby composting center Earth Matter was instrumental in helping to set up the Urban Farm. Since 2009 Earth Matter has been involved in healthy soil initiatives and has led community-based, volunteer efforts to collect residential food waste for composting in more than 34 local community gardens. They are a community partner of GrowNYC's composting program, using food scraps collected from greenmarket customers to create nutrient-dense, healthy soil. Their work is assisted by a crew of animals: rabbits Tino and Mycetes live above a "poop chute" that funnels nitrogen-rich rabbit droppings into worm bins. Goats contribute by providing droppings for the "passive poop pen," where, combined with wood shavings, it is anaerobically transformed into excellent fertilizer two years later. A coop of colorful chickens roost over a similarly harvested "deep litter." The center offers visitors hands-on activities, demonstrations, volunteer opportunities for adults and children, and an internship program.

The Urban Farm and Earth Matter's Compost Learning Center are open to the public on summer weekends through September 28 from 12 - 4pm. More info is available at earthmatter.org/participate and grownyc.org/governors-island-urban-farm

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