

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Exploring New Possibilities in Growing

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From the outside, Local Greens Farm looks like your typical warehouse. However, this highly controlled structure has awakened new possibilities in growing fresh food. This two-and-half-year-old company is proactively growing local produce in a limited space, using vertical equipment and LED lighting. The arrival to this growing style for co-founder and general manager Ron Mitchell came from investing decades researching and experimenting with a variety of growing trends.

Wanting to learn about horticulture, Ron began his adventure in young adulthood, where he had the privilege to work with and learn from an experienced grower.



Pictured: Ron Mitchell and his daughter Faye—founders of Local Greens—show off their products at a Whole Foods in Oakland, California, in 2015.

“It was the right person; he took the time to teach me about growing,” said Ron. Equipped with the foundations, the grower assigned Ron to 1 square acre, immediately applying his newly learned skills.

His growing journey continued in Oakley, California, as assistant grower at a 3-acre hydroponic greenhouse. During this time, the company changed hands and Ron was promoted to head grower. Upon acquiring the position, Ron made the decision to engage the expertise of a Berkeley professor, who was instrumental in teaching both hydroponics and how things grew.

However, it wasn’t until Ron moved his family to Hawaii that he began to explore indoor production.

“It was too humid for greenhouse growing, so we went indoors,” said Ron. For 20 years, Ron successfully grew microgreens and small leafy vegetables for stores, restaurants and resorts in the controlled indoor

environment.

Returning to his hometown of Santa Rosa, California, Ron made a career shift and took a job with PARsource. It was this experience that exponentially expanded Ron's knowledge about lighting, software and equipment. A true entrepreneur, Ron decided to start his own equipment business. But Ron was meant to return to growing, and it would be his daughter, Faye, who would provide some inspiration.

Growing up in the industry, Faye has always believed indoor farming made perfect sense and could imagine the possibilities of its growing popularity.

"I would often drive through California and was shocked by how much land is being used and water being wasted," said Faye. "They could be doing so much more with the land."

Faye saw the possibilities in the equipment that her father was manufacturing and how it could be used for an indoor growing environment. Before leaping back into growing, the father and daughter team studied the market, including speaking with Whole Foods, about whether they would be interested in locally grown microgreens.

With Whole Foods on board, Ron returned to the world of horticulture, this time with Faye as a co-founder of their business, Local Greens.

"I really believe that growers are born, not created, to a certain extent," said Ron. Today, Local Greens continues to grow microgreens and basil, selling to Whole Foods and other local retailers.

At Local Greens, everything is grown indoors, using proprietary equipment, while also maintaining complete control of the humidity, temperature and lighting. With 3,000 sq. ft. of floor space under cultivation, the vertical system extends the area exponentially, going up eight levels. The entire facility's water use is about the same as two average California households. With the intent of reducing their carbon footprint, Local Greens strives to maintain their core customer base within a 50-mile radius.

"There's a huge benefit to staying local—you're not only able to see your customer, but you can also keep an eye on the product," said Ron. "We cut out the middle man, being both the growers and delivering direct." Their closest customer is the Gilman Whole Foods, just 100 ft. away.

Controlled environment

A certified organic operation, Local Greens takes great efforts to maintain a high level of sanitation, thereby limiting the amount of pathogens.

"We don't wash our product; it's perfectly clean," said Faye. "We simply cut it and slightly dry it in 2 oz. to about 9-oz. packages."

Packaging in the same room that they grow, Local Greens strives to adhere to a very tight sanitation program. The air is filtered with a HEPA filter, ensuring that bugs, pollen and bacteria are kept out of the environment. As an additional measure, Local Greens maintains a positive pressure in the room, so that

when the door is opened, the blown air ensures that both bugs and pests are kept out.

Before entering the room, each employee walks through a foot bath, which has a disinfectant in it. This not only keeps containments at bay, but ensures that the floor is continually disinfected.

“Everything that goes out of the room gets disinfected before it comes back in,” said Ron. “It’s really very rigid.” To ensure the high sanitation levels are maintained, the environment is cleaned daily.

Seeds are another potential source of pathogens. To mitigate this risk, Local Greens inspects and tests each seed before it enters the environment. Once tested, the seed is hermetically sealed in the vault, ensuring that rodents or other pests cannot enter the area and contaminate it.

When asked about plans for the future, their hope, shares Faye, is that their facility will be used as a model farm for herbs, lettuce and microgreens in an urban center.

“The idea is three distinct leafy greens, grown under one roof, for customers within a 50-mile radius,” said Faye. “With the plans of replicating it, probably Los Angeles will be next, and then onwards.”

For now, they’re looking at maximizing the growing potential of their current environment, as they’re currently growing only at 40% of their capacity. However, even at 40%, Local Greens is growing 3,500 lbs. a month.

With a strong intern program in place, the environment is used as a four- to six-month training program where students become deeply involved in the world of vertical warehouse growing. The overall hope is to share their love of growing with others and together discover innovative ways to feed communities with indoor, locally grown produce. **GT**

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