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Campus-grown produce appears on UAF plates

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Labels are kept stockpiled and organized as efforts to provide produce to the university dining halls continue Thursday morning, October 21, 2009 at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Facilities Services Greenhouse.

FAIRBANKS — Some of the salad that University of Alaska Fairbanks students munch on this winter will have a surprising birthplace — just a few hundred yards away from the Lola Tilly Commons.

The salad greens, tomatoes, peppers and other produce will be grown at the lower campus greenhouse, tucked behind the UAF power plant.

It's an unexpected role for the greenhouse, which had focused on growing cut flowers and houseplants.

But the effort is part of a growing trend

on campus to make better use of local foods at student dining halls.

“It goes full circle,” said Greg Whiteside, the residential dining manager at Lola Tilly. “We get this produce, and we try to be more sustainable.”

Since the program started this summer, the weekly ration of 30 to 120 pounds of vegetables is barely a blip at the Lola Tilly Commons, where 700 students are fed at a typical meal. But the thought of growing more local produce on campus has dining managers excited about the possibilities.

“We’ve served a whole lot of fresh vegetables to these guys, and we’ve loved doing it,” said Robert Saxon, the food production manager at the commons.

For the past seven years, the greenhouse has been a seasonal grower of flowers for use on campus. But last summer Facilities Services Landscape Supervisor Jenny Day and dining services General Manager Ted Lancette forged an agreement to provide seasonal produce to NMS, the company contracted to provide meals on campus.

The influx of fresh, local produce has been such a hit that expansion plans are in the works. To add more local herbs to the menu, several raised beds were installed in front of the commons last summer. There also is talk about including gardening space upstairs to boost the amount of local produce even more.

“I don’t know where it’s going to go,” Day said. “Now we’re just showing we’re here and willing to try anything.”

This summer, the produce was delivered to the dining hall for free since the plan is still an experiment. At some point, Day said, compensation will be arranged as produce deliveries become more reliable.

“They wish we could do tons more,” Day said. “So do I.”

The locally grown food is one of several measures being taken to make dining services at UAF more environmentally friendly.

The cooking oil used at UAF — about 500 gallons every three months — is being sold to Greg Micks, a Wasilla entrepreneur who plans to turn it into biodiesel.

And UAF dining halls also have an arrangement with a few local mushers, who claim about 10 gallons of leftovers and expired food each day to feed to their dog teams.

The changes have had a big impact on the NMS bottom line — the amount of waste has dropped by half in the past few years, Whiteside said.

“If you can save money and do sustainability, every company in the world would like that model,” Whiteside said.

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