

# Church starts urban farming in downtown Dothan

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When you think of growing herbs and vegetables, you likely imagine acres of land, rows of crops, and huge farming equipment. The Harbor Church in downtown Dothan is changing your perception of what it means to grow food with its new urban farming program.

The church is working with Grow Hope Farms to grow food at the church through aeroponic farming.

"Aeroponic System means growing without soil. The roots grow on the inside of this tower and the plant leaves get larger on the outside," said Grow Hope Farms owner Aundria Kirchhoff.

Plants are grown in what's called a tower garden. It's a holder made of food-grade plastic that allows plants to grow vertically in a small amount of space. The tower has a watering system and minerals needed to help spur plant growth.

"The fertilizer is designed with human nutrition in mind, so it has the macro and micro nutrients a plant needs, but also has a myriad of other nutrients that are designed for human consumption," said Kirchhoff.

Volunteers with the Harbor Church started the process of planting the seedlings Wednesday - everything from basil, lemongrass, to lettuce. The tower can be adapted to grow vegetables that have vines - like tomatoes. In about three weeks, they're expecting to see plant growth.

Reverend Kody Kirchhoff, executive director of The Harbor, said the idea behind the urban farming system is to fill a healthy food gap in the community.

"We do give out food every day, but many times that food is daily subsistence survival food. It might be quick pop top items," said Kody Kirchhoff. "Vienna sausage or ramen noodles, sure it's substance, but it's not healthy living."

He said he knew partnering with his sister-in-law's organization would be a step forward in filling the gap.

With the 10 tower gardens the church has now, they estimate they'll be able to provide roughly 3,200 meals to people in need a year. The meals won't just go to people who visit the church, but they hope to distribute the food in the community.

"Our hope is to be able to package it and take it into the neighborhoods as we're doing what we call street ministry," said Kody Kirchhoff.

By providing access to healthy foods, both The Harbor and Grow Hope Farms believe this will help address food desert issues in Dothan.

"Almost the entire city of Dothan has a need - that people are more than half a mile from the nearest grocery store," said Aundria Kirchhoff. "So we want to get healthier food into communities that are desperately needing that nutrition."

"We believe in a Christ-based ministry that our bodies are a Holy Spirit. If we're filling it with junk, that's it's going to make us fill like junk, so we want to be able to fill it with good, healthy things," said Aundria Kirchhoff.

Aundria Kirchhoff emphasized aeroponic farming is not a replacement for traditional farming, but an alternative to address food needs and capacity limitations.

"With the toxins and everything in our environment, it's really difficult to make sure the soil is clean and has a great ecosystem," said Aundria Kirchhoff. "Just like we have to start parking vertically in urban areas

because we don't have enough parking spaces to have all surface parking, we're doing the same thing here with food."

The church is starting with 10 tower gardens and hopes to expand in the future bringing the community together around the kitchen table.

"We see this as much more than what the product is going to be," said Kody Kirchhoff. "To unite the city, community to come together and serve. The product of that service will be blessing lives who don't have all the capability of nutritious and healthy food for them."

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