



Urban greenhouse ready for first plants Area institutions eager to see harvest

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Starting next month, you could have some Cleveland winter lettuce with that sandwich.

That's when Green City Growers Cooperative, a worker-owned business, expects to harvest its first crops from one of the largest urban greenhouses in the country, a 3¼-acre hydroponic operation off East 55th Street in the city's Central neighborhood.

Mary Donnell, chief executive officer of Green City, said she's had interest from potential customers, including Heinen's supermarkets and distributors who supply restaurants and food service operations in Northeast Ohio. Customers will be able to choose from green leaf, butterhead and red lettuces, and a variety of tender herbs.

"We'll be competitively priced," she said of goods normally shipped in from California and Arizona.

Terry Romp, produce buyer for Heinen's, said he's been advising the startup and is eager to see – and taste – the end product.

"We told them that if it's good, and it's competitively priced, we'll buy it," he said.

"It makes sense to buy food closer to home. It costs us \$7,000 just to run a truck one way from California."

The Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals and Case Western Reserve University have also expressed an interest in buying from the new company, said Steven Standley, chief administrative officer for UH and chairman of the board of Evergreen Cooperative Corp.

The nonprofit group oversees the greenhouse, along with two other recently formed, for-profit companies, Evergreen Cooperative Laundry and Evergreen Energy Solutions.

Both of those businesses have met founding goals to employ a total of about 40 people who are given a living wage and health insurance, he said. Both are also showing growth, he added, and may still reach the other goal of profit-sharing with their workers.

Evergreen was inspired by cooperative companies established in Spain in the 1950s, during a time of political upheaval. Many of them still exist and are flourishing, Standley said.

Evergreen hired Donnell, who was instrumental in starting the hydroponic greenhouse program for the Ohio State University Extension service and who has a background in commercial fresh vegetable processing. She hired Graham Tucker as head grower. He worked at Green Circle Growers, a commercial flower greenhouse in Oberlin.

Donnell calls her company a \$17 million economic-development project, using federal new markets tax credits, support from University Circle businesses, the Cleveland Foundation and \$450,000 in loans from the city to build the structure and hire many of its workers from the neighborhood.

Mack Squire, 53, will be part of the initial work force of 25 showing up Monday to plant the first crop.

Unemployed since July, Squire said his employer, an industrial stamping plant, lost a contract to a company in China.

While he hopes the company can be successful enough to share profits with workers, as designed, he said he is happy to have health coverage and a starting salary somewhere around \$10 an hour.

"I live simply," he said.

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Caption: LYNN ISCHAY THE PLAIN DEALER Head grower Graham Tucker and new employee Constance Suggs plant ceremonial seeds Wednesday at Green City Growers, a new worker-owned cooperative in Cleveland.

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