



## A Farm Grows Atop a Convention Center in NYC

The Javits Center, home to the city's largest rooftop green space, expanded in September to include a one-acre farm that will supply its kitchen with fresh food at almost zero food miles.

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL    DECEMBER 8, 2021



Planting crops at the Brooklyn Grange Rooftop Farm at the Javits Convention Center. (Photo credit: Javits Center)

**N**ew York City's iconic event space at the Javits Center in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood shut down during the pandemic and hosted a hospital and mass vaccination site. Now, with apple and pear trees and more than 50 crops growing on its rooftop, it has reopened with in-person events that serve food produced from its own urban farm in hopes of connecting people to how their food is grown.

“We really expect it to be a place where we can grow a decent amount of food in an efficient manner for the convention center,” said Ben Flanner, co-founder and CEO of Brooklyn Grange Rooftop Farm, the company that designed and manages the farm. “It’s a beautiful space, and I think it can be very inspiring from a what-is-possible standpoint for the hundreds of thousands of people that come through the convention center.”

The one-acre farm on the Javits Center’s 200,000 square-foot roof officially opened in September. The Brooklyn Grange team was able to plant and harvest several fall crops, including radishes and salad mixes, for New York Comic Con 2021, which the Javits Center hosted in early October. The Javits Center and Brooklyn Grange—which also operates its own rooftop farms in Brooklyn that produce 100,000 pounds of organic produce each year sold through markets, a CSA program, and wholesale—expect the farm to provide 40,000 fruits and vegetables to be used in Javits Center meals each year.

“We’re very excited for the fact that all the food can be consumed right in the building where it’s being grown,” said Flanner. As the harvest is rolled down the hallway on carts to the kitchen on site, no fossil fuels are consumed for transportation, and the operation virtually eliminates the carbon footprint of packaging. “Nothing needs to be loaded into a van and delivered, and that reduces quite a lot of the logistics,” he adds.

The new rooftop space, which includes the farm, orchard, greenhouse, enclosed glass pavilion, outdoor terrace, and solar panels, was part of a \$1.5 billion expansion project at the Javits Center that added 1.2 million square feet of event space. The center, which opened in 1985, installed a 6.75-acre green space on the roof in 2014, which at the time was the second largest in the country and is still the largest green roof in New York. The Javits Center partnered with institutions including Drexel University and the New York City Audubon Society to study the green roof’s effects and documented 35 species of birds and five species of bats that made their homes there. They also added a honey-bee apiary.



“It was just teeming with wildlife,” said Jacqueline Tran, the Javits Center’s energy and sustainability manager.

The team wanted the expansion to build on the biodiversity they were witnessing. “While we thought we could put another green roof on it, we started asking, “How do we push the envelope?”” said Tran. “How do we move it forward?”

The idea for a farm was inspired by the discovery that there used to be a farm in the neighborhood.

While urban agriculture as we think of it today is a relatively new concept, and Brooklyn Grange is only about a decade old, New York City has a long urban farming history. Much of Midtown and the Upper West Side was farmland from the 1700s until the city’s grid of streets was created at the end of the Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s. Agriculture started coming back to the city in the 1970s, with community gardens sprouting up in the Bronx after a series of fires destroyed many of the buildings there.



Today, thousands of pounds of produce are grown in the city every year—in community gardens, urban farms, and indoor vertical farms. The New York City Council recently passed a bill to establish an office of urban agriculture as part of its larger effort to create a Climate Resiliency Plan. The office will be tasked with producing a report on the state of urban agriculture in the city every five years, with the first due in fall 2023.

### **Convention Center Farms Growing Nationwide**

**J**avits Center isn't the only convention center in the U.S. with its own farm. The Blue Bear Farm at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver, Colorado, and Smart Farm, an indoor farm in the Greater Columbus Convention Center in Columbus, Ohio, also showcase local sourcing and sustainability for thousands of visitors each year.

“The upside of having a farm directly on site is enormous,” said Colorado Convention Center Executive Chef Kayley Boyle. “We can take local sourcing to a whole new level and pull herbs and other items right from around the corner. No need to rely on shipping or deliveries, which during the pandemic has obviously become an issue throughout the food and hospitality space.”

While it's currently hard to estimate the percentage of produce a year that the convention center uses from the farm because many events have been on hold or smaller due to COVID-19, the centers see a great deal of value in having the onsite farms.

Ohio's Smart Farm, which was installed in 2017, grows roughly 5,000 pounds of chives, basil, mustard greens, cutting celery, red shiso, and more depending on the season.

“Hydroponic farming provides renewable and a relatively easy way to grow high-quality produce, while using no herbicide or pesticide that directly impact the environment and our guests,” said Leslie Nutter, the sales and marketing coordinator of Greater Columbus Convention Center.



Blue Bear Farm, which is nearing its 10-year-anniversary, works closely with Boyle to plan which fruits, vegetables, and herbs to grow. The Brooklyn Grange team expects to have a similar collaboration with the Javits Center’s culinary team.

“We looked at the total vegetable purchasing their caterer had done the year prior and then matched that up with what would grow well on the roof to set up a tentative crop plan,” Flanner said. “Over the span of a few seasons I’m sure it will evolve as will the menu of the catering facility. I’m sure certain things we grow will be popular and they’ll want more of them, and then other things we grow might decrease the percentage. The kitchen has been quite flexible and enthusiastic.”

Flanner and his team are planting herbs in the greenhouse and will start most of the annual vegetables there in the winter. Each year from April to October, the Javits Center offers tours to the public of the rooftop by appointment. The greenhouse itself can host gatherings of up to 25 people, and 1,500 people can dine on the rooftop, near where the food is grown.

“We’re quite excited about it,” Flanner said. “It should have a good biodiversity, and we’re really hoping it can be a small little bit of ecosystem for wildlife in the city.”



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