

# Ohio State researcher working to prove that parking lot farms can produce bountiful crops

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COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER | THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH Meagan Tehua  
photographs an experimental blacktop garden set up near the Ohio Agricultural  
Research and Development Center in Wooster.



COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER | COLUMBUS DISPATCH Blueberries ripen in Kovach's garden.

**WOOSTER, Ohio** — It's a picturesque farm, where plump strawberries ripen on vines shaded by peach trees.

In their branches is a nest where robin hatchlings chirp for food. But take a step back, and you remember that this farm thrives in the middle of an asphalt parking lot on an Ohio State University campus.

“There are a lot of abandoned parking lots in Midwest cities,” said Joe Kovach, an associate professor of entomology at the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center here who runs the farm. “Since there is so much wasted land, we thought, ‘What can we grow here?’” Most city gardens are planted in corners of backyards or on lots where houses once stood. Kovach’s, however, is plopped on a parking lot, where you can still see faded yellow lines. Kovach has been farming for research since the 1980s and said he jumped at the chance to use the parking lot, which sits next to an abandoned, graffiti-covered dorm. To compare methods, the researcher is testing how well plants grow in raised beds, giant pots and plots of land he cut out of the eighth of an acre of asphalt. Makeshift greenhouses on one end heat plants and force even temperamental trees such as peaches to bear fruit. Other crops grow in a one-eighth acre plot of soil alongside the parking lot. He said nearly 6,200 plants and trees — blueberries, peaches, kale, green beans, strawberries, raspberries, apples and basil plants — grow with equal zeal atop the asphalt or in the ground. Kovach said that based on last year’s crop, which yielded enough produce to feed 30 to 40 people, both methods grow about the same amount. Some of the produce is examined for research, and this year the rest will be donated to a local community gardening organization that will sell it to raise money. To show off the idea, the research center is hosting open houses. Meagan Tehua was among a group of about 12 who toured the farm on June 1. The program director for Goodness Grows, a northeastern Ohio community gardening organization, said she went there to learn a few tips. Tehua said city gardens show “the importance of everyone having access to fresh food in all settings, especially urban (environments), which in the past haven’t had as much.” Kovach agrees. “We have to find ways to produce food that is closer to people,” he said. In Cleveland, urban gardening has provided food to some families who live in “food deserts” — neighborhoods that don’t have full-service grocery stores, said Robert Brown, Cleveland’s planning director. Often, families in urban neighborhoods have limited access to fresh food and vegetables, which also cost more than most packaged foods. Tehua said she isn’t planning on digging into parking lots anytime soon, but there are vacant lots in the Youngstown area that could serve the same purpose. Empty housing lots, parts of school playgrounds, patios and even shallow wading pools filled with soil have been used to plant crops in Columbus, said Bill Dawson, the director of the Growing to Green community garden program at the Franklin Park Conservatory. “Gardeners have been making best use of space wherever they can, especially community gardeners who tend to

reuse areas,” Dawson said. “Any available space is enough.” That’s a challenge Kovach wants to live up to. He said he could transform a Walmart parking lot into a thriving garden. “You give me a closed ... parking lot, and I could implement these techniques,” he said. Using safe, filtered soil can make a difference, said Trisha Dehnbostel, the program manager for Local Matters, a Columbus-based nonprofit group that encourages eating locally grown foods. She said adding manure to raised beds and pots can boost growth. Kovach added that raised pots often yield better crops because they provide more air, better drainage and fluffier, warmer soil than traditional gardens. Another plus is that traditional crop pests don’t go looking for a meal on asphalt, he said. Plants and trees with short roots seem to grow best in asphalt gardens because of the limited space for growth, Kovach said. Dehnbostel warned against planting in the same container crops that have different needs, such as those that need a lot of water and those that can survive arid conditions. Plants also should be planted away from roads or sidewalks, Dehnbostel said. Road salt and compounds in car fumes can seep into the soil and hurt crop growth. At the same time, plants can grow almost “anywhere there’s sunshine, it gets hot and there’s soil,” Dawson said. “Whether it’s a homeowner or an apartment dweller, a patio is the same thing as growing on asphalt.”

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