Urban Farming in a Parking Lot? See It in Action in Wooster: Tours Start May 31

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Berry good on asphalt? Learn how to grow fresh, abundant food in old parking lots in a series of tours at Ohio State's Wooster campus.

WOOSTER, Ohio -- Joe Kovach, an Ohio State University scientist who is studying the best ways to grow food in old asphalt parking lots, will hold free public tours at his test plots in Wooster at 4 p.m. on the last Thursday of each month through August. The first tour is May 31.

The tours are aimed at urban agriculturists in Akron, Cleveland, Columbus and other cities, Kovach said.

“We’ll cover two main points: the basic ecological principles involved, and that you can actually do this,” he said.

“People say parking lots are barren. But you can get more production off of a back parking lot than you ever thought you could do.”

Kovach is growing apples, peaches, green beans, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, tomatoes and more in an asphalt parking lot behind an old, closed dormitory at Ohio State’s Agricultural Technical Institute.

Video (0:34): OARDC's Joe Kovach speaks on his "parking lot" test plot tours and what they'll show.

He's testing several methods: in pots and raised beds sitting on top of the pavement; in pots suspended on wire mesh fencing, a form of "vertical gardening"; in beds set in trenches cut right through the asphalt; and all three ways both inside and outside of high tunnels.

"We'll talk about how important biodiversity is," said Kovach, who has previously developed small-scale, mixed-species polyculture plantings as a way to increase biodiversity together with yields. "We've tried to incorporate more biodiversity by having genetic diversity, or polyculture systems; more spatial diversity by having different crops at different heights; and more temporal diversity by having different planting dates and different varieties so you have early, mid- and late-season harvests.

"What we want is ecosystem stability," he said. "Even on a parking lot you need ecosystem stability."

The plantings are now in their second full season. A recent visit showed big, healthy-looking blueberry bushes full of just-forming berries; apple trees with trunks thicker than a person's arm growing in pots the size of a Jacuzzi; long beds of bright-green strawberry plants; and peach trees pushing up close to the roof of their high tunnel.

Also during that visit, Kovach found and examined some tiny, plant-damaging mites, a kind of pest, on the underside of a raspberry leaf; showed the fencing and Plexiglas gate guard he installed to keep out deer, groundhogs and an especially clever rabbit; and said he's monitoring for the presence of certain

kinds of beneficial mites and flies, which he thinks should arrive soon.

He said he hopes to show visitors the importance of a good design. “But nature does bat last, and we’re trying to figure out how nature adjusts to growing food on asphalt as opposed to growing it out in a field,” he said.

“It’s possible. Look at what we’ve done here. But there’s not much data on growing fruit on a parking lot, I can tell you that.”

Meet at the old ATI dormitory at 1427 Dover Road south of Wooster, directly across from the ATI campus and just south of the university’s Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, for whom Kovach works.

For more information, call 330-263-3846 or e-mail kovach.49@osu.edu.

The other tours are on June 28, July 26 and Aug. 30.

Kovach is an associate professor of entomology, is head of Ohio State’s Integrated Pest Management Program and holds a joint appointment with Ohio State University Extension.

OARDC, ATI and OSU Extension are all part of Ohio State’s College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences.

Details about some of the college’s other urban farming efforts are at http://go.osu.edu/KaA and http://go.osu.edu/JDw.

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