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NEW PRODUCTS | APRIL 24, 2008 | BY SCOTT SALYER

Rooftop Crops Could Make Tastier, Lower Carbon Produce

Urban farming. To put it bluntly, it sounds like an oxymoron rolled inside a bad idea. Community gardens have long served as tiny oases for stressed city-dwellers, but that's more hobby than food supply. Now, two university of Wisconsin-Madison students have won the G. Steven Burrill Business Plan Competition with their cross between a farmer's market and a green roof.

The idea is to put rooftop gardens on top of grocery stores ("Oh, the produce aisle? Yeah, go out those doors, climb onto the fire escape, don't trip..."). Their proposed company, Sky Vegetables, sounds a little seedy at first, but these greenhouses wouldn't be garden variety. They would be teched-out soilless hydroponic grow rooms churning out fruits, vegetables, herbs, and flowers with no weeds, and no pots.



The [Burrill Competition](#), held by the UW-Madison School of Business, encourages its students to develop and present a business plan and offers a \$10,000 1st place prize. Winners Keith Agoada and Troy Vosseller plan for the super foods to be sold downstairs in designated sections with a live feed from the aisle to the roof, so customers can actually watch their leafy greens grow.

They say that using [hydroponics](#) means that the system can produce 5-15 times the yield with 10% of the water usage. The fake n' bake greenhouses also mean that the grower can ignore outside weather conditions.

Agoada and Vosseller say that the average travel distance for produce is 2000 miles. Besides transportation costs, this causes fruits and vegetables to be picked prematurely, resulting in a less nutritious and tasty product. The greenhouses make use of rooftop space ordinarily reserved for tar storage and keep the garden freshies close to market, avoiding the carbon emissions of normal food transportation.

The pair is pushing their hydroponic hopes on the [Sky Vegetables](#) website, where they blog about rooftop gardening projects the world over. With stories of chronic food shortages and high grain prices hitting the newspapers, maybe it's not such a foggy idea after all.

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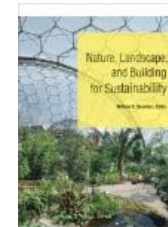
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