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RECIRCULATING FARMS HELP FLORIDA FAMILIES EAT HEALTHY DURING TOUGH ECONOMY

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Winter Park, FL – The paved alley behind the Winter Park Commerce Center strip mall does not look like fertile farmland. But there, urban gardener Sahib Punjabi grows an abundance of lettuce, peppers, tomatoes, and more, all with the help of water and fish, instead of soil. [Sahib's Aquaponics Research Farm](#) — or as he calls it, his "living food jungle" — is one of many new farms and training centers cropping up, literally, in central Florida. These innovative operations provide not only fresh, local produce but also economic opportunities for Floridians affected by the financial crisis.

Aquaponics is a type of [recirculating agriculture](#), an eco-friendly method of farming that uses naturally cleaned, recycled water in place of soil. It combines aquaculture, or fish farming, with hydroponics, where plants grow in nutrient-rich water. Fish waste provides organic nutrients for the plants, and the plants in turn clean the water for the fish. The result is a closed-loop, symbiotic system that grows food without depending on pesticides or other chemicals. Aquaponic farms can range in size from large, commercial ventures to small, desktop systems that grow herbs, fruits, lettuces or certain vegetables

Another Florida resident turned aquaponic farmer is Gina Cavaliero, former co-owner of a once-successful contracting business that floundered when the housing market collapsed. "The faucet just turned off," Cavaliero remembered. "We'd recently been introduced to aquaponics, and thought that growing food would be recession-proof — people have to eat." Today, [Green Acre Aquaponics](#), a commercial farm and consulting company located in Brooksville, is thriving. According to Cavaliero, more than a hundred people participated in their most recent aquaponics training sessions, eager to learn how to grow food for their own use and for sale to local restaurants and markets.

What is attracting so many new people to this way of farming? "One big advantage of an aquaponic farm or garden is that it can be built virtually anywhere — indoors, on rooftops, or in urban lots where soil is paved or otherwise not fit for growing food," noted Marianne Cufone, Executive Director of the [Recirculating Farms Coalition](#), a collaborative group that supports farms and farmers. "That means just about anyone can have an aquaponics system and enjoy fresh, sustainably-grown food."

Helping families grow their own food is the mission of [Aquaponic Lynx](#) in Yalaha. Owner Aleece Landis provides equipment, consulting services, and training to individuals who want an aquaponic system at home. She sees aquaponics as a great benefit to families. "It's an easy way to garden and grow your own food," Landis explained. "You don't have to remember to water or fertilize the plants. You just have to feed the fish, and you'll have fresh, healthy food available when you want it."

Sahib Punjabi believes that home-growing food helps save on grocery bills and improve health. "There are health benefits to adding vegetables to your diet, and to not eating pesticides," he said. "There is also the pleasure of working with nature and seeing something grow — it's a wonderful stress relief."

For Gina Cavaliero, individual health benefits and savings are just part of aquaponics' potential benefits. She sees aquaponics as part of a revolution. "If we can get a decent resurgence of the small family farm, we can feed more people local, clean, chemical-free food — and create jobs in the process." For Florida families affected by diet-related health problems and the economic downturn, that is a win-win proposition.

For more information on aquaponics and other types of recirculating farming, including tips on building your own system, visit <http://www.recirculatingfarms.org>.

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The Recirculating Farms Coalition is a collaborative group of farmers, educators, non-profit organizations and many others committed to building local sources of healthy, accessible food, through eco-efficient farms using clean recycled water. We believe these recirculating farms can create stable green jobs and supply sustainably-grown food – fruits, vegetables, herbs and humanely-raised seafood – in diverse communities nationwide, and someday, worldwide. The Recirculating Farms Coalition is headquartered in New Orleans, Louisiana.
<http://www.recirculatingarms.org>