

Thevoz's goal is to scale this up and one day have aquaponic greenhouses on the roof. He wants to replace the fish pellets with soldier fly larvae from his compost bins, if he can get approval from the local health department. That way he can use all the waste that he composts from his catering business — leftovers and cardboard boxes and packing material — to be part of the aquaponic system, too. For now though, he only harvests microgreens.

He's also looking for researchers or grad students to use his facility for research.

People thought I was nuts

"I got to tell you that first when I was putting this together, people thought I was nuts," he remembers with a certain pride. "My employees, my friends... thought I was completely out of my gourd. But I got to say I proved them wrong, the system is fully functional, it works."

It works, but it isn't economical for Thevoz at the moment. It'd be cheaper to just buy tilapia. Steven Newman, a Greenhouse Crops Extension Specialist at Colorado State University, is skeptical of aquaponics' ability to compete in the general market.

"if you're marketing to the person that's going to go to the large grocery store, you're not going to meet that market demand." he savs.

In niche markets though, he sees potential. "You need to focus on a higher end market that's willing to pay the price for locally produced food. Not everyone can afford that."

And in the Washington, D.C. region especially, where runoff to the Chesapeake Bay is a serious concern, he says it could be attractive.

A question of resources

Another way to get this type of system to become economical is to get really good at it.

"It's very doable, it can be very economical," says Don Bailey, a research specialist at the University of the Virgin Islands Agricultural Experiment Station. "He's trained hundreds of people on how to set up aquaponic systems around the world and says he hears back from many people who are doing well."

One of the big reasons why urban agriculture is a difficult proposition is that land and water in the city are expensive compared to their cost in, say, rural Mississippi, where catfish are farmed by the acre. That's exactly why Bailey thinks aquaponics is a good idea.

"The reason we do it in the Virgin Islands is because our land is very expensive and agricultural land is hard to come by," he says.

Farmers have to find a way to farm intensively, and get the maximum output from a small space. Hence fish farms and plant farms.

Thevoz, for now, says he isn't really worried about the money making angle. It's really more of an experiment.

"We want to create an efficient vertical farm," he says. "Right now, we're just trying to mitigate our waste."

And on that goal, at least, he's succeeding.

[Music: "Loop" by Underworld from Back to Mine]

Photos: Food Waste



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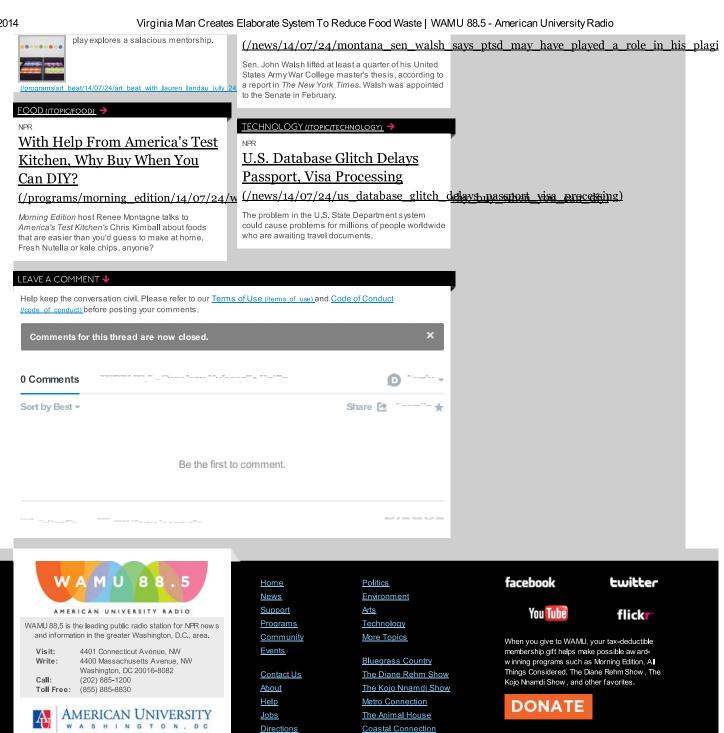
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