



O'Hare Urban Garden

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Chicago may be best known as the windy city but it is quickly earning itself a new moniker as the "green city". With a seven hour layover in Chicago we had intended to visit the City Hall roof garden and/or the Millennium Park to see Frank Gehry architecture. The weight of our carry-ons quickly called for a change of plan so I asked an airport employee if there was a nice shopping/eating area in the airport? He quickly replied "No!" So I asked, "Is there a meditation room perhaps?" This time we were in luck. "No meditation room-but there is a sweet organic garden" he replied. He'd never been to it himself but he knew where it was and had heard very good things about it from other airport employees. So we walked to a space that lay between Terminal 2 and 3 in the mezzanine level of the ORD Rotunda Building. Above us on the second floor white pillars sprouting with greenery caught our eye. Banners and posters helped us find our way as well.

The 928 square foot plot is enclosed by a waist high glass wall capped with a strip of shiny

silver metal. Over 1,000 plants are planted in pillar pockets. Twenty-six plant towers each hold 44 plants. The circular base of the pillar is 30" in circumference and has hoses running to it. The plants are started by seed in natural rock based fiber cubes, receive warm, mineral-rich water, and after attaining a certain size are transplanted to the Tower Garden™. The nutrient rich solution mists the roots inside the pillar.

"26 plant towers are suspended above a 20-gallon reservoir of nutrient solution that is internally pumped through a self-sustainable planting tower."

- O'Hare Urban Garden interpretive signage

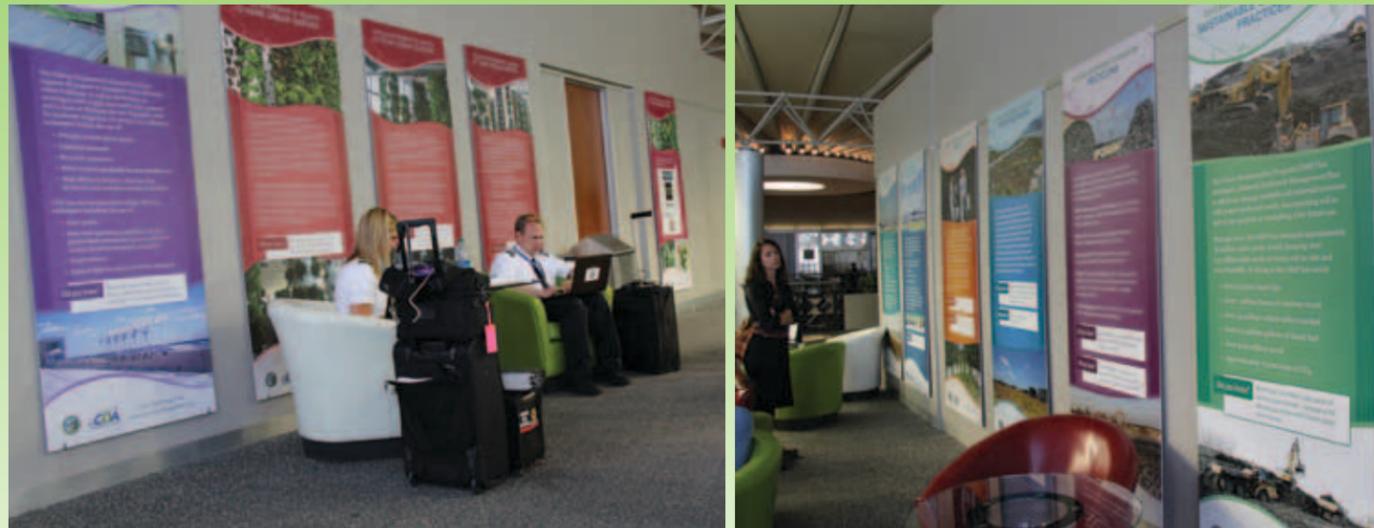
O'Hare Urban Garden is a collaboration between Chicago Department of Aviation and HMS Host Corporation. Aeroponics is a method of growing plants in a water and mineral nutrient solution without soil. The O'Hare Urban Garden uses vertical farm technology to reduce its spatial

footprint. Interpretive signage claims this system uses 5% of the water normally required for conventional and organic farming. The garden supports Chicago's Department of Aviation's commitment to sustainability by strengthening the local economy and job market, providing a learning environment/opportunity for travelers; and by being local reduces pollution associated with transportation.

Benefits of aeroponics include:

- Provides year round cultivation
- Produces a higher yield per square foot
- Requires no weed pulling
- Uses two-thirds less water
- Is typically less expensive

Produce being grown in O'Hare Urban Garden includes swiss chard, arugula, several types of sweet basil, chives, cilantro, dill, edible flowers, mixed lettuces, an assortment of hot peppers, a variety of lettuces (gourmet and traditional iceberg), sage, thyme, and oregano. The marketing resembles community supported agriculture (CSA) only the local restaura-



rants (Wolfgang Puck, Wicker Park Seafood & Sushi, Stefani's Tuscany Café, Tortas Frontera by Rck Bayless, and Stanley's Kitchen & Tap) are the "community" agreeing to purchase the products.

"This is the world's first vertical aeroponic garden inside an airport terminal. It produces local all-natural pesticide-free produce for airport restaurants."

- O'Hare Urban Garden interpretive signage

The entire scene surrounding the Urban Garden is striking. There are no loud voices and no fast moving feet. In fact, people are napping, reading, or engaged with their laptops and iPads. The seats are contemporary yet comfortable. Chairs can be easily slid to a new spot and appear in earth colors of red, green and white. The tables echo the airport motif with sleek glass and silver metal. The O'Hare Bar & Grill, a restaurant located on the lower level under the Urban Garden serves meals to garden patrons and most people are drinking Dasani water or wine. Even the waitress is calmer than most airport employees-exceedingly personable and charming. The implications of installing urban gardens are enormous. If urban gardens can create a sense of calm in a bustling often brutal airport environment just think of their healing potential in everyday urban life.

