

# ROUNDUP

A COFFEE  
CONFESSION  
B4



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Ellie Penfield-Cyr

Rachel Alter gives a tour of Mountain Roots latest farming operation, set to begin in four shipping containers on South Main in Gunnison.

# Thinking inside the box

Mountain Roots explores shipping container farms

**Kate Gienapp**  
Times Staff Writer

While few people in the Gunnison Valley can grow fruits and vegetables year-round, the nonprofit Mountain Roots Food Project is trying to do just that as it explores the use of shipping container farms at its South Main location in Gunnison.

“We weren’t searching for container farms, but we were searching for year-round growing solutions — as are all farmers in our valley,” said Mountain Roots Executive Director Holly Conn.

Conn said the initial plan was to build another greenhouse in the valley to increase production. But then Mountain Roots learned of shipping containers outfitted with aquaponics that were for sale in Crested Butte South following the closure of Tassinong Farms.



Kate Gienapp

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Kids pick up fresh produce last week on South Main as a part of the Mountain Roots CSA.

# DINING GUIDE



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More than five years ago, Tassinong Farms opened in Crested Butte South. Owner Kate Haverkamp set out to grow a constant supply of the freshest vegetables possible. That's how she discovered the retrofitted shipping containers made by Freight Farms.

Freight Farms is a company based out of Boston, Mass. They have built more than 50 shipping container farms throughout the country. The company up-cycles used shipping containers and converts them into hydroponic gardens that can deliver thousands of pounds of fresh produce in both urban and rural areas.

The shipping container farms come equipped with plumbing, electrical and climate control hookups. They have the tubes and the shelving and lights in place and are ready to be attached to water and electricity hookups to begin growing.

An automated system mixes the ideal ratio of nutrients to water and moves the water every two hours to all plants. The system depends on wicking strips that are pressed between a mesh where the plants grow.

LEDs give the plants 18 hours

of light, which encourages them to grow quickly. The six hours of "rest" allows for workers in the farm to plant seedlings and harvest the crops to sell.

"Everybody went wild for that (Tassinong Farms). It was so fresh and so clean and so delicious," Conn said. "When sadly she (Haverkamp) announced she was closing Tassinong Farms, there was a collective sigh, "That's too bad, we're really going to miss those greens."

But it was an opportunity for growth for Mountain Roots, which has long searched for creative solutions to the valley's notoriously short growing season.

The four shipping containers have since been transported from their original Crested Butte South location to their new home at South Main in Gunnison.

While there's no produce growing quite yet, Conn said the plan is to continue raising money and seeking investors as the shipping containers are installed and hooked up to city utilities.

Conn said each shipping container will produce yields equal to an acre worth of food.

But the big difference from

in-ground farming is that food grown in shipping containers uses significantly less land and water.

"All of this will be grown on five gallons of water a day," Conn said.

Like Tassinong, Mountain Roots will focus on sustainable growing practices, and making sure operations are hyperlocal. Keeping sales localized cuts down on transportation costs and emissions, all of which contribute to environmental damage, according to Conn.

Conn said the four shipping containers will also provide a unique learning opportunity for Mountain Roots farmers.

"If we add this to their training, there will be more tools to bring into the world, and that has a ripple effect," Conn said. "It might or it might not be the right technology for here, we don't know yet — we're experimenting."

That's the role of a nonprofit, Conn said. "Either we're busting the myth, giving our stamp of approval or saying these are the pros and cons."

(Kate Gienapp can be contacted at 970.641.1414 or kate@gunnisontimes.com.)

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