

In The News



Carlos Madera and Rosanna Lopez, both of Holyoke, harvest romaine lettuce inside one of the Freight Farms containers managed by Holyoke Community College on Race Street.



Claire McGale, a 2019 graduate and manager of HCC's Freight Farms urban agriculture program, holds two robust heads of sweet green crisp salanova from Monday's harvest.

Submitted photos

Freight farms rescue in romaine recall

Early on Monday morning this week, Claire McGale, manager of Holyoke Community College's Freight Farms urban agriculture program, received an urgent email from Christopher Robert, chef supervisor for HCC dining services, which is managed by Aramark.

They were in a bind. A national recall on romaine lettuce from Salinas, Calif., had left Aramark short of salad greens for the start of the week.

"He said, 'We'll take whatever you have,'" said McGale.

Fortunately, they had a lot.

Over the course of the morning, McGale and her co-workers harvested close to 70 pounds of lettuce from the two repurposed shipping containers on Race Street managed by Holyoke Community College behind the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

"We were going to harvest today

anyway," McGale said on Nov. 25, "but we're doing much more than we would have."

HCC has been growing leafy greens inside the Freight Farms containers since October 2018. The project is a partnership with the city of Holyoke and MassDevelopment, which supplied the funding to purchase the two containers.

Each container is a fully operational hydroponic farm equipped with 256 grow towers and the capacity to grow as much produce in a year as an acre of farmland, but without any soil.

The lettuce "picked" Monday — that is, pulled from the grow towers — included romaine, two kinds of butterhead and sweet green crisp salanova.

"Unlike most places today, we have romaine — thanks to Freight Farms," Robert said Monday.

The lettuce was used in the salad bar in HCC's cafeteria, for grab-and-go

packaged salads, as well as toppings for sandwiches.

Freight Farms "bailed us out," said Mark Pronovost, director of HCC dining services. "They helped us out big time."

Pronovost said he received an alert over the weekend about the recall on contaminated California lettuce and took immediate action.

"We threw out all our product," he said. "We don't take any chances. I don't know what other schools are doing, but reaching out to Freight Farms was easy for us."

Aramark has been buying Holyoke-grown Freight Farms lettuce and incorporating it into its salad blends since February, but never before as much as Monday.

"Today, because of what happened, it's pretty much all from Freight Farms," he said. "It's beautiful stuff. Tasty. Flavorful. Fresh. It's all hydroponic, so

it's nice and clean. They do a really nice job."

Monday was an auspicious day for Freight Farms in another way as well. It set a weight record for individual heads, recording 4.3 pounds for a container of 15 heads of salanova.

Freight Farms also supplies produce to the HCC Culinary Arts Institute, Holyoke Medical Center and the HCC Food Pantry.

"That's encouraging," McGale said. "That's how I keep track of our success rate."

With more experience, McGale said, Freight Farms produce has become more robust. This batch of lettuce took five weeks to grow from seed to harvest.

She seemed especially impressed by two large heads of salanova she balanced in both hands.

"I'm really excited to see what these weigh," she said.