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Creativity cultivates at IIT UFarm

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When people think of farming, they often visualize mundane and repetitive physical labor: scattering seeds over the ground, putting plants in soil, watering. This is the mental image that many of the urban populace has of agriculture. Farming, it would seem, is a dull affair, requiring no innovation and providing no true satisfaction outside of a few vegetables for the table. The UFarm is here to challenge all that.

IIT's UFarm, located on the Greek Quad, is a place unknown to most IIT students. Even those who have seen it in passing typically have little knowledge of what it is and the position it holds in the university system. The privileged few who have had the opportunity to get informed and become involved have found a whole other realm, rich with the promise of intellectually satisfying activity.

The UFarm is a sphere wholly separate from the typical IIT experience, yet also a reinforcement of the university's core values. Students swamped with the mental burdens of exhausting homework, projects, laboratory assignments, exams, and all the hustle and bustle of the high-tech world can disconnect, even for the briefest moment, with

their hands in the rich composted soil of the garden. Repeating the same motions as their ancestors have for thousands of years, they can recharge as they breathe in the fresh outdoor air among the growing flowers and vegetables. There is so much more to agriculture than just this bucolic image.

Careful thought has been put into every bed of soil, every plant in the ground. An optimized list of crops had to be planned for each season, balancing the capacity for growth in the conditions of the UFarm, the demand for the produce, and the aesthetic aspect on the field. The entire garden surface was also designed to appeal the eye. Then, not only the necessary seeds and seedlings, but also the soil, the containers, the growing lights, the watering devices, the tools, and all the little details that go into the procedure of growing had to be ordered and organized. Furthermore, the maintenance of the garden is no simple task either. Compost must be delivered to and spread on the beds. Both the plants on-site and the seedlings being raised indoors in the UFarm's seed-starting laboratory must be watered thoroughly each day, and the plants growing outdoors and in the sun-heated hoop house must be watered twice to keep the soil moist. The site must be cleaned, and garbage must be removed as it accumulates. Information about hoop house conditions and

crop production must be kept, archived, and displayed in a user-friendly format. There is also much potential for technological development to give this ancient profession an edge in the modern world. Everything from sensors to data applications can be implemented in the future by some of IIT's most knowledgeable, tech-savvy students.

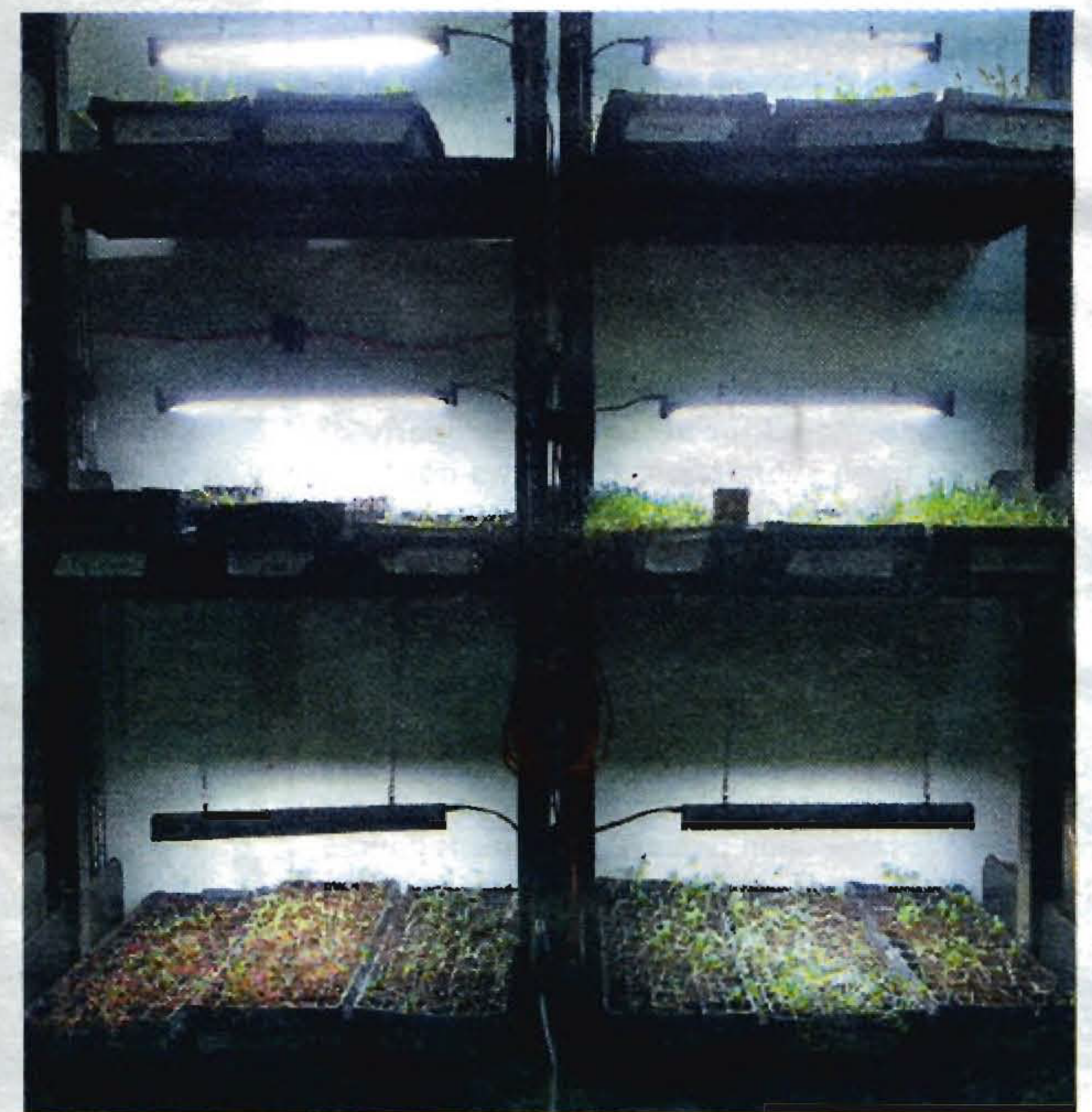
Most importantly, this vast quantity of work has to be coordinated by a team. This year, with its cold, harsh beginning and its sudden, almost instantaneous leap into spring, has provided many challenges, but the tight collaboration between the students managing the garden has helped the UFarm grow and prosper beyond expectations. From the new seed lab developed in the winter to expand the UFarm's growing season, to the biodegradable newspaper pots created to transplant delicate seedlings, to the flowers grown for the campus beautification initiative, the UFarm has been full of innovation. This spring has provided a valuable learning experience to all those involved, and a preparation for the real-life challenges that are best learned outside the classroom. IIT's mission is to produce citizens of the world who are not only academically rigorous but also ready for every other facet of professional life, and for the deep interpersonal relationships that come with meaningful careers.

IIT's UFarm is not just another garden. It is also a cornerstone of the community, a muse for future farmers and a playground for the thinkers of tomorrow. It is meant to inspire new generations to rethink their food system, the urban landscape, and their precious time at IIT.

To get involved, contact Neil Griffin, the head of the UFarm student organization, at ngriff2@hawk.iit.edu. The organization is on HawkLink and will soon have an active YouTube channel featuring educational videos on how to get started with urban farming.

There is always room for new members. There are also plenty of volunteering opportunities, as well as community garden beds available to lease out to students, staff, and any other interested people. There is even a UFarm IPRO that allows for more in-depth involvement, not just in the UFarm itself, but in many other urban agriculture projects on and around campus.

So remember, the next time your head is swimming with all the academic stress in your life, whether you just want to get your hands dirty or you're looking for an alternative creative and intellectual outlet, a friendly farm is waiting for you!



Photos courtesy of Andreea Beca