

Cultivating fresh ingredients at the Marriott at City Center in Newport News



Staff members at Newport News Marriott at City Center, plant herbs on hotel property on the eve of Earth Day. The herbs will be used in dishes and drinks at the hotel.

(Courtesy Mark Butcher)



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The staff at Newport News Marriott at City Center have planted the seeds to deliver fresh, local flavor into its dishes and drinks.

Amid the shrubs around the building and the sidewalk, the staff planted cilantro, parsley, bay laurel, sage, sweet basil, purple basil, oregano, thyme, rosemary and chives grown at Knotts Creek Wholesale Nursery in Suffolk on the eve of Earth Day and about a week after the date of the last frost.

The mint, which would kill the other herbs if planted next to them, are inside pots near the garden.

"We've already started using the garden to incorporate in different parts of the hotel," said Marriott's general manager Mark Butcher. "We just borrowed the space that was already here."

Some of the basil, for instance, had already made its way into a water dispenser in the lobby.

In larger cities like New York and London, some urban dwellers have taken up guerrilla gardening, the practice of planting flowers and vegetables in abandoned lots and other places in the city where there's a free plot of dirt. Butcher said they're doing the same thing at the hotel.

"That's exactly what we're doing — we're guerrilla gardening," he said.

Rocco Montini, the hotel's chef, already is coming up with recipes using the herbs. Rosemary and thyme can be used to season chicken, and cilantro for fish tacos.

"It doesn't get much more local than our backyard," Montini said.

The herbs will be used in drinks as well as food.

One of those drinks is the bird of prey basil sour, made with Eagle Rare bourbon, lemon juice, simple syrup, egg white and basil.

"You've got your protein in from the egg. You've got your greens. It's a meal in a glass," said bartender Rebekah Repass.



Newport News Marriott at City Center is serving cocktails like this bird of prey basil sour using herbs from a newly planted garden on hotel property.

The mint in the garden will go into mojitos and juleps. The bird of prey basil sour also can be made with purple basil that gives the drink a darker hue.

Along with the herbs, the bar is stocked with grenadine, syrups in flavors like rock candy and cinnamon, and infused liquors made in house.

While some hotels in larger cities are planting their own herbs, Butcher said the closest one to Newport News he knows of is in Richmond.

The quest for ingredients that comes from the grounds of the Marriott doesn't stop at the herb garden.

Butcher has been a beekeeper for eight years and kept bees on the premises of Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa in Ponte Vedra, Fla., where he worked several years ago before going to Macon, Ga. He hopes to do the same in Newport News.

Their honey would be used in cocktails, tea, bread, desserts and more, and honeycombs could be added to cheese plates. Beeswax can be used for cosmetics and furniture polish. Montini is currently learning the tricks to beekeeping himself.

Butcher hopes to cultivate relationships with local farmers and fishermen for fresh ingredients to go in items served to guests, something Butcher already has a history of doing.

His hotel in Florida bought hydroponic lettuce from small farms in danger of going under before going into business with the Marriott there.

Buying produce from those farms helps keep them afloat, and the hotel ends up with good food, Butcher said.

"We're benefiting directly, too."

Castillo can be reached by phone at 757-247-4635.

Give it a try

Want to try a taste of Newport News Marriott at City Center at home? Try their recipe for one of their spring drinks, the bird of prey basil sour.

Bird of Prey Basil Sour

2 oz Eagle Rare bourbon

3/4 oz lemon juice

3/4 oz simple syrup

1 each egg white

1 each large basil leaf

- Add all ingredients to shaker without ice.
- Shake firmly to emulsify liquids.
- Add ice and shake to chill.
- Strain into rocks glass with fresh ice.
- Garnish with basil leaf and lemon wedge.

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