



English

Space farming

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Some years ago I advocated sending a farmer into space, back when the shuttle missions were running into technical difficulties with some regularity. A farmer, I figured, could fix most anything with duct tape and baling wire. Things are now much improved in the space program and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is looking to the future: now farming itself figures in U.S. exploration of the Final Frontier.

As NASA plans for longer stays in the international space station, and perhaps for missions to infinity and beyond, it can't depend on its traditional "take it with you" approach to maintaining human life. Robert Ferl, a University of Florida professor, puts it this way: "Right now, when we fly (into space) we take a bottle of water, a bottle of oxygen and a bottle of food, use them up and throw it out. It's the storage-and-resupply technique. We can't keep doing it that way," for longer and more distant missions.

Mike Martin, University of Florida vice president for agriculture and natural resources, says "It's all about biology in space, and plants in particular. We've got to figure out how to grow food on the way to Mars."

NASA and the University of Florida, Florida's Land Grant University, have teamed up to form a new Center for Space Agricultural Biotechnology and Education. Learning to grow crops, algae and useful plants in the space station will pave the way for constructing delicately balanced ecosystems in spaceships and eventually greenhouses on Mars, mimicking the way Earth's biosphere recycles everything. "If you grow enough plants to produce food, then you're growing enough for your oxygen needs, too," Ferl explains.

Florida will construct a Space Experiment Research and Processing Laboratory at the Kennedy Space Center. When it's completed in about 18 months, several University of Florida researchers will work from there - alongside NASA scientists who will become adjunct faculty at the university.

By linking with NASA on one of the nations' premier challenges, Martin says the University of Florida will benefit by carving a niche in the stars that few earthbound universities can match. "We have a special opportunity," he says.

No kidding. But it still might be a good idea to take an actual farmer - and baling wire and duct tape - along.

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