



**NEWS**

# A fungus for good: How mushrooms are solving problems in Mass.

Published: Jan. 05, 2025, 5:10 a.m.



Tuyet Tran, executive director of the Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts, holds mushrooms the organization is growing in Worcester. Courtesy

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Inside the historic Printers Building in downtown [Worcester](#), hundreds of edible [mushrooms](#) are proliferating in a former storage room.

Oyster, shiitake and lion's mane species grow out of sawdust "fruiting" blocks under humidity tents, soon to make their way to people's plates.

Betting big on the urban mushroom enterprise is the [Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts](#). The project, which has received thousands in grant money, aims to combat food insecurity while providing a source of income for the Worcester-based nonprofit that serves Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese immigrants and refugees.

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Tuyet Tran, the organization's executive director, is a Vietnam refugee herself. In their native country, her mother was a farmer.

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"I've always loved growing things, growing vegetables," Tran said. "We consider food, especially herbs, as medicine. It comes naturally to us. The idea for the mushrooms really expanded from that notion."

The coalition's venture was among two mushroom-centric projects selected in a recent round of grant funding from the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources. The other is at East Boston's [Eastie Farm](#), an urban agriculture nonprofit working in food security and climate justice.



A volunteer handles comb tooth mushrooms at Eastie Farm. Courtesy

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In both cases, the community organizations wanted to bolster their food offerings to the populations they serve, while also turning a profit by selling the rest to local restaurants and farmers markets.

“There is a lot of interest in mushrooms,” said Kannan Thiruvengadam, Eastie Farm’s director. “They’ve always been of interest to people who do foraging and permaculture because it naturally grows in forests, as long as you know what to harvest and how to harvest it.”

Not all mushrooms are edible, and some are actually poisonous. Others are the psychedelic kind that Massachusetts voters rejected on the November 2024 ballot.

A joke among mushrooms foragers, Thiruvengadam laughed, is that “you can taste any mushroom once.”

## ‘I want it to grow into a social enterprise’

The fungi-growing catalyst for both Eastie Farm and the Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts was the same: the COVID pandemic made them want to boost food security efforts in the face of deep social and health inequities laid bare.

In Worcester, Tran said food is an incredibly important part of their mission, particularly because of the prominence of refugee and homeless populations.

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They were already well-connected with local farms and seasonal produce, but the organization wanted to provide a self-sustaining, year round offering. Tran herself had been learning about edible mushrooms at home during the pandemic.

“We wanted to grow mushrooms because it’s part of the diet of Asian folks,” she said.



Mushrooms grow out of a sawdust block at the Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts in downtown Worcester. Courtesy

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The coalition’s website tells visitors, “No, we’re not turning people into zombies and, no, we’re not dabbling in the psychedelic arts. What we’re doing is far more magical: growing nutrient-packed mushrooms to nourish our communities and fight food insecurity.”

Mushrooms are said to have powerful health benefits, including anti-cancer and immune-boosting properties. And because of their ultraviolet light exposure, whether it be sunlight or indoor light, they're a good source of Vitamin D.

Different mushrooms are known for different benefits. Lion's mane, for example, is touted for brain health, while reishi is known for anti-stress and relaxation effects.

The endeavor started with a \$120,000 grant from the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, outfitting an old storage room with water, lights, shelving and growing equipment inside the Portland Street building that houses the Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts.

Between September and December, they harvested more than 800 pounds of mushrooms. Tran said it's been quite a learning process, but a welcome — and fun — one.

"I had no idea how hard it was to grow mushrooms," she said. "You really have to control the environment. The humidity, the temperature, the water misting."

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The Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts is growing mushrooms inside a downtown Worcester building. Courtesy

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The mushrooms, which are grown organically, are distributed to families, shelters, senior centers and temples. The goal is to also sell them to local restaurants and farmers markets to make a small profit for the organization.

“We want to be able to sell some, to make some money back, to pay the water and electricity bill,” Tran said. “We can grow a lot. It’s all part of the plan. You start small and move up to higher volume. I want it to grow into a social enterprise.”

Tran hopes a workforce development opportunity will come from it, especially if they get a commercial kitchen for high-volume processing and mushroom drying.

## **‘Food, farming and education’**

At Eastie Farm, \$40,000 from the Department of Agricultural Resources will support a build-out of a mushroom production center. It certainly helps that two top staff members are “super excited about mushrooms,” Thiruvengadam said.

Eastie Farm has sites around East Boston where they invite neighbors to grow food together, pick up produce boxes and learn more about the natural environment.

East Boston has the highest percentage of immigrants of any Boston neighborhood. And it’s also one of the most vulnerable communities in the state in terms of pollution and climate change impacts.

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Mushrooms pictured at Eastie Farm in East Boston. Courtesy

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In 2022, Eastie Farm debuted a zero-emissions, geothermal greenhouse, thought to be the first of its kind in Massachusetts. Climate resilience is at the core of the organization's mission, Thiruvengadam said.

“What we’re trying to do here is empower ourselves so we can not only prepare for what is to come, but also address the needs of our people today,” he said. “Food, farming and education.”

During COVID, Eastie Farm rented kitchens that were closed and served more than 5,000 hot meals every week at the height of the pandemic.

The nutrient-rich mushrooms will be a piece of the farm’s ongoing food security efforts. They’ll be used in meals and CSA boxes, and likely make their way to restaurants at market-rate price.

“Most of what we do really comes from what we hear in the community and what the youth express to us as interest,” Thiruvengadam said. “The mushroom farm will be a space for young people to learn how things work and what does nature grow. How to process safely, how to cook and consume, how to do new things.”

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