Non-GMO. Pesticide-free. Nutrient-dense. Greenhouse-raised. What’s not to love? But if squeaky-clean, farm-to-fork-in-hours-maybe-minutes salad greens aren’t to your taste, how about lettuce with good karma? OK, maybe Rinchen Sanpo, a packer for the rooftop farmers Gotham Greens, is kidding about that. But not entirely.

Gotham Greens lettuce has something that probably no other produce in New York City can boast: it’s infused with beneficial Buddhist vibes. Thanks to the 40 or so Tibetans employed by the Brooklyn-based growers, Gotham Greens lettuce and herbs are tended, picked, and packed by workers who seed the greenhouses with their good humor, compassion, and Tibetan Buddhist prayers and chanting.

“Our lettuce is happy lettuce,” the Gotham Greens folks like to say. It’s an honest claim. The 12 different varieties under the company’s label are raised in hothouse splendor in three state-of-the-art rooftop greenhouses in Brooklyn and Queens. Names like Blooming Brooklyn Iceberg, Greenpoint Oak Leaf, and Queens Crisp attest to the product’s local origins. But by any name, these are poster greens for the kind of cossetting that separates hand-reared gourmet lettuce from the brown-edged wilting leaves in most supermarket produce aisles. Even greenmarket lettuce gets a run for its money: with hydroponics—water, not soil, as the growing medium—Gotham Greens stretches the growing season from a few months to all year.

“These are spoiled plants,” says the company’s cofounder and CEO, Viraj Puri. Their energy-efficient, climate-controlled environment is computer-monitored to stay at 75 degrees and 70 percent humidity, with lighting adjusted to maximize photosynthesis. The continually recycling water is laced with nutrients custom-mixed for each lettuce variety. Beneficial ladybugs and parasitic wasps patrol the growing troughs, replacing pesticides with what Nicole Baum, the company’s marketing and media maven, calls “insect warfare—the good kind.”

Puri credits the Tibetans with creating a harmonious environment for the 85 or so people in the New York workforce. “They’re kind to everybody,” he says. “We all spend so much time working hard, and to be around nice people is a beautiful thing.” At the Greenpoint facility in Brooklyn, before work and on the lunch break, the sound of murmured Buddhist chanting emanates from the greenhouse, where many of the Tibetans are hunched over their long, scroll-like prayer books or are reciting mantras.

Puri isn’t a Buddhist practitioner but says he resonates with Buddhist principles: “Happiness, contentment, regard for natural resources—these are all cornerstones of sustainability.” Raised in the United States but Indian by heritage, he was first exposed to Tibetan Buddhist culture on family holidays in the Himalayas. He later worked on solar energy and green development in Ladakh, the northwestern Indian province known as Little Tibet. But it was while managing a greenhouse-construction project in New York City that he saw the rooftop greenhouse as “a great way to grow food using fewer resources and feed urban dwellers with a good supply of local produce.” He and a friend, Eric Haley, now the company’s CFO, explored the commercial viability of urban rooftop farming. It wasn’t an entirely new concept: others were already turning unused rooftop space into garden plots. But with greenhouse cultivation they could turn out fresh produce 365 days a year. Gotham Greens now produces 20 to 30 times more lettuce per acre than
commercial farms.

The company’s first greenhouse opened in Greenpoint in 2011. In early 2014, it installed a second one on the roof of the Whole Foods market in Brooklyn’s Gowanus neighborhood—the first greenhouse integrated with a store. The following year, a third greenhouse opened atop a toy factory in Queens, and the company expanded to Chicago, where it built the largest rooftop farm in the world.

The Tibetans have been an integral part of Gotham Greens from the get-go. Lama Pema Dorjee, a Tibetan Buddhist monk and Puri family friend who is active in the Tibetan Community of New York and New Jersey and founded the Sunday Tibetan Language School of New York, helped build one of the greenhouses and conducted blessing ceremonies for all three. He also brought in their first greenhouse employee, Namgyal Gonpo. “Before we knew it, we had about a dozen Tibetan employees just through word of mouth,” Puri says. Dakpa Gyaden, who works at the Gowanus location, was referred by a Tibetan at the Whole Foods sushi bar downstairs. Like Dakpa, who was raised in a Tibetan settlement in southern India that cultivated cash crops, some workers have come with farming experience; others have learned on the job.

As much as the Tibetans are valued as loyal, hardworking members of the Gotham Greens team, they value the company as a workplace that espouses principles consistent with their own. Rinchen Sanpo, who grew up attending the Dalai Lama’s teachings in Dharamsala and met His Holiness “many times,” sums up the appeal. “From an environmental point of view, we are very, very happy to work here,” he says. The soil-free method conserves water and land, and “there’s no chance of harming insects accidentally.” And then there’s a less tangible but no less important benefit of the job: transforming the mind. “During our work we can say prayers and recite mantras, so we can keep a good sort of mind for people.” And for the greens.

Joan Duncan Oliver is a Tricycle contributing editor and the author of six books. She edited Commit to Sit: Tools for Cultivating a Meditation Practice, an anthology of Tricycle articles.

:: GARDENING ::

The Whole Earth Is Medicine
BY WENDY JOHNSON

This summer in our coastal community of Muir Beach, dharma friends and neighbors are planting a medicine garden of wild and cultivated sage. The summer soil is alive and hungry. The planting proceeds freely, without a thought-out pattern or design.

With more than 900 members in its august family, sage, *salvia*, from the Latin *salvere*, “to be well,” serves as both an herb of the hearth and home pantry, and a potent medicine in the pharmacopeia of old Europe and the Mediterranean region. Sage has long been held in the highest esteem of the ancients: the saying “Why should a man die whilst sage grows in his garden?” goes back to Anglo-Saxon times.

I first thought of planting a medicine garden in January, around the time of the 2017 presidential inauguration. The weather in the Bay Area was tempestuous, the West Coast submerged under an atmospheric river of torrential rain. Still, more than 80 activists, artists, and meditators convened at Point Reyes National Seashore to convene for an alternative inauguration in the eye of the storm. We walked along the San Andreas fault line to Kule Loklo, a recreated Native Coast Miwok village. There, we stood in a sodden circle as ceremonial leaders joined me in Muir Beach. The earth was still heavy with rain. We layered the raw soil is alive and hungry. The planting proceeds freely, without a thought-out pattern or design.

The sky cleared, we walked three miles to the village of Point Reyes in silence to dedicate a peace garden in the middle of town. We planted a young white sage plant in the garden’s center. Revered as an herbal savior for its many uses, white sage is said to open the memory and to generate truthfulness. It also stimulates and cleanses the liver, supporting blood filtration while aiding digestion.

After the inauguration, the sage family continued to work on me. I began to save seeds and cuttings from more than 13 distinct species of sage, growing them all in our tiny Dragon Coast greenhouse. While I worked, I often thought about the two meanings of the English word *sage*: derived from *salvere*, it refers to the plant; but a homonym derived from *sapere*, “to be wise,” refers to the sage teacher. Salvias, like sagacious human guides, further our capacity to perceive and generate discriminating wisdom.

When it was time to prepare the soil for the medicinal sage garden, the new farm apprentices from Green Gulch joined me in Muir Beach. The earth was still heavy with rain. We layered the raw soil with old issues of the New York Review of Books, pages lovingly placed on the ground, facedown, so that land’s microbe could digest well-written analyses of the overworld. We covered our paper trail with last season’s wind-whipped prayer flags and applied wheelbarrows of...