BOSTON (January 30, 2014) — The Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University (USDA HNRCA) and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society are combining resources to raise vegetables in a new indoor garden on the university’s Chinatown campus. Located in the street-level lobby of the USDA HNRCA, the garden is an extension of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society’s Garden to Table initiative, which provides hands-on learning opportunities and educational support to people interested in growing their own vegetables.

“The research conducted at the USDA HNRCA explores the relationship between nutrition, physical activity and healthy and active aging,” said Simin Nikbin Meydani, D.V.M., Ph.D., director of the USDA HNRCA and a professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. “Having an indoor vegetable garden that’s visible from a busy city street is a unique opportunity to raise awareness of the role of nutrient-rich foods in chronic disease prevention and in maintaining good overall health.”

The garden consists of three elevated beds filled with soil and starter fertilizer and is outfitted with grow lights and a drainage system. Alongside the crops, signs developed by USDA HNRCA nutrition scientists explain the nutrient content of what’s being grown.

“We are hoping for a steady harvest every two to three weeks,” said John Heine, special projects administrator at the USDA HNRCA. “Our initial plantings consist of radishes, beets, turnips, Vietnamese mint, tatsoi and kale. These items were specifically chosen given the time of year and the controlled indoor environment. For some variety, we plan to change the types of food we plant every few months.”

The Massachusetts Horticultural Society’s Garden to Table Program also maintains a 6,000 square-foot garden in Wellesley, Mass., to grow food for public cooking demonstrations and area food pantries. In 2013, Garden to Table donated almost 4,000 pounds of produce to two food pantries.

“The Garden to Table program operates
with the collective goal of promoting healthy eating habits through the joy of growing and cooking vegetables,” said Lisa Kamer, the Garden to Table program coordinator. “We continue to work in partnership with the USDA HNRCA on a variety of programming ideas to increase awareness about the nutritional benefits of gardening. We are excited to continue to help translate scientific efforts through our food growing and cooking initiatives.”

Vegetables from the USDA HNRCA garden are donated to St. Francis House, a day shelter in downtown Boston that provides basic, rehabilitative and housing services for the homeless and serves as many as 700 meals a day. “The produce we receive will help us provide high-quality meals and model healthy eating,” said Leslie Oliver, manager of food services at St. Francis House. “Our guests will not only enjoy the fresh flavors of these combined greens, they will receive the nutritional benefit of vitamins, minerals, and fiber.”

More information about USDA HNRCA and Massachusetts Horticultural programming, including the Talk and Taste lecture series, can be found at http://hnrca.tufts.edu/mass-hort/

Founded in 1829, the Massachusetts Horticulture Society is dedicated to encouraging the science and practice of horticulture and to developing the public’s enjoyment, appreciation and understanding of plants and the environment.