Since it sounds like the kind of menu item that you might normally find at a high-end restaurant specializing in locally-sourced ingredients, a whole crop of hydroponically grown lettuce was recently donated to the Uvalde County Nutrition Center. And, according to the center, they are more than pleased to have it.

"It just looks so nutritious and pretty," said center director Edelidia Mendez. "We've been testing it in salads to see how people like it, and it's been very popular. They say they like it more than just the heads of lettuce from the store."

In all, the nutrition center received eight varieties of lettuce that were hydroponically grown at the Texas A&M AgriLife Center under the supervision of Dr. J.J. Leskovar, center director and professor of vegetable physiology.

"It was part of the grant that we would give the center any excess lettuce we had after our initial testing was over," Leskovar said, noting that AgriLife teamed up with the Uvalde County Underground Water Conservation District general manager Vic Hilderbrand and Uvalde County Underground Water Conservation District general manager Vic Hilderbrand display several varieties of lettuce. The produce was donated to the Uvalde County Nutrition Center on Tuesday.

Several varieties of hydroponically grown lettuce were given to Uvalde County Nutrition Center so that taste tests and feedback could be provided to growers at Texas A&M AgriLife Center.

By tweaking the amount of calcium and nitrogen that is circulating in the water, Leskovar believes that issues like tip burn can be avoided. Another benefit of growing hydroponically, he said, is a tremendous reduction in the amount of water that is normally used when growing in soil.

"Using this method we only use about 10 percent of the water that is normally used, so you're looking at a savings of about 85 to 90 percent," he said. "It's really exciting to have sustainable production of leafy greens with less water."

And though Leskovar said this is AgriLife's first time to donate produce to the nutrition center, he hopes to continue doing so in order to, ultimately, grow a better lettuce.

"The plan is to provide produce for people in need while also getting feedback on things like taste and color," he said. "So we'd definitely like to continue this in the future."