

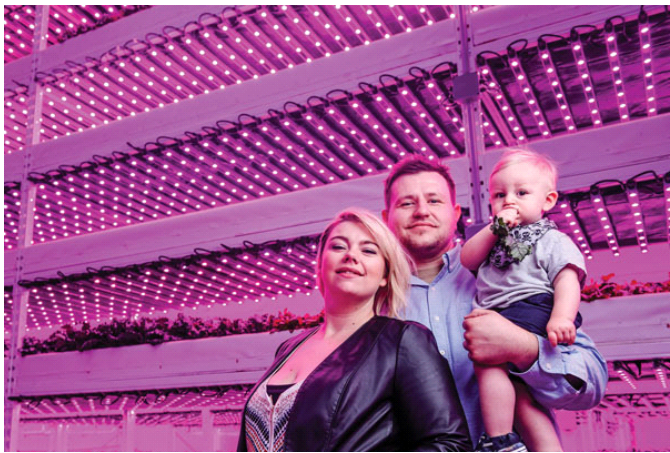
GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Filling a Gap

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Amid seemingly endless fields of grain, one company is moving the agriculture hub of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, indoors. Ecobain Naturals is the brainchild of Brian and Roberta Bain who identified a significant gap in their local agricultural production—the lack of year-round, fresh produce.

Most produce that was available was often shipped thousands of miles before it arrived on the table of Saskatoon residents. The Bains decided it was time to change that and set out to find a solution to aid with food security.

Pictured: Brian and Roberta Bain, shown here with their son Knox, created Ecobain Naturals to fill a need for locally grown, fresh microgreens and herbs for the Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, area.

“There was a lack of ultra-local fresh produce,” said Brian. “I began interviewing every farmer that I could find at the local farmers market to research the opportunities and the gaps in the market.”

Brian’s venture into indoor growing began as a hobby where he experimented with several varieties of produce within his own home. At age 24, Brian decided to convert his passion into a career and went to school to become a horticulturalist by trade. Brian and Roberta’s goal was to become the go-to vendor for year-round fresh produce. Vertical farming, with its climate control, lack of pests and year-round harvest seemed to be the right fit for their new business.

Their vision would require strong community partnerships and significant financing to get their operation up and running. It was a lofty goal, but one that both Roberta and Brian fully embraced. The couple were true trailblazers, proposing a concept that was still largely unheard of.

“Banks didn’t understand what we were doing,” said Roberta. “However, we were committed to power through to our dream, despite the somewhat rocky start.”

Introducing Saskatoon to vertical farming

Starting up a commercial vertical farming operation is far from a small feat; there’s the up-front cost of establishing the indoor growing environment and attempting to predict production levels so that sales can be secured in advance.

“Moving new product can also be a challenge for retailers,” said Roberta. “With a new type of product, there wasn’t a ton of data that we could follow, so it was difficult to accurately forecast sales.”

For Ecobain Naturals, this challenge was compounded by the fact that vertical farming was still largely an unknown for their region. Recognizing that there may be challenges ahead, both Roberta and Brian maintained their previous employment until their new company was sustainable.

“Brian is a problem solver,” shared Roberta. “When he sees something that isn’t being done in the best way, he immediately takes on the challenge on how to make it better.”

The couple actively sought out a vertical farming system that could meet, and ideally exceed, their production needs with the minimal amount of inputs (hydro/water). The initial phase of the project was launched in a 1,200-sq. ft. warehouse in an industrial area in the city. This phase incorporated a hydroponic vertical growing system that used significantly less water than conventional systems. At the time, their venture was still largely experimental.

“People didn’t understand what we were doing,” said Roberta. “We are in an agriculture area and our company did not fit the mold.”

The couple had done their research, but it wasn’t until they applied it firsthand that they would know the long-term viability of their project. Thankfully, the retailers were beginning to show an interest, and within six months, the business was fully operational.

“We were fortunate to partner with a fairly substantial grocery retailer in Canada almost immediately,” said Brian. It was this initial relationship that helped pave the way to a successful vertical farming operation.

Fostering positive relationships with the retailers has been a vital component to the overall success of their operation. It was through these relationships that the couple identified the retailers’ challenges and the type of products that their consumers were seeking.

Originally a microgreen grower, Ecobain Naturals discovered that their retailers were lacking a viable market for their fresh herbs, so in 2015, Ecobain Naturals expanded to a 6,000-sq. ft. operation to make room for the herbs.

“The majority of the herbs that were in our region were exported,” said Roberta. “And I found that the fresh basil in our region was tasteless. And so we chose a variety that was extremely flavorful, offering better options than imported herbs.”

Throughout their journey, Ecobain Naturals formed several partnerships, including the University of Saskatchewan, National Research Council, Saskatchewan Food Industry Development Center, and several private companies that have helped to keep their company posted on the changes in the industry.

One of these partnerships was with Philips Lighting, who helped them become the first North American farm to use their second generation LED lights within the vertical growing model. This transition has not only decreased the overall energy costs, but helped to increase production. Their focus continues to be evolving and adapting their operation so that it remains innovative while being as environmentally, economically and socially sustainable as possible.

When asked about the future, Brian and Roberta shared that another evolution is on the horizon. They’re extremely excited about their new adventure and the possibilities that it holds for their own company and for vertical farming.

“We are taking everything that we learned here and moving into a bigger landscape,” said Brian. **GT**

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