

Breaking the barriers of traditional farming

Urban Farm Tech founder hopes to build a sustainable greener future



Aquaponics system with media growbed



Vertical farm wall modular system

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Growing up around green-thumbed grandparents, Ipoh-born Francis Chuah always had a passion of planting for as long as he can remember. Even now, he still has fond memories of his grandmother sharing stories when China was at war and how the citizens cultivated their own food for survival.

It was during that time when Chuah learned how to fully utilise whatever space that was available at his grandmother's house to plant vegetables, grow chickens and the like.

Now, Chuah realises that the younger generation has a completely different perspective when it comes to food. In an interview with *MALAYSIA SME*, Chuah recounts how the idea began one morning when having breakfast with his family.

They were discussing some of the food items that they had run out of and his children's response was to grab some money and head to the supermarket. Chuah believes the time had come to change their mindset.

"It was definitely not the first time they responded in that manner, thinking that the only solution to obtaining food is just taking money and going to the supermarket. But I think that's a dangerous perception to have," says Chuah.

This sparked the establishment of Urban Farm Tech, a company



that aims to integrate farming in the city and allowing urbanites to become more self-sustainable when it comes to food supply.

Since the day he founded the company on February 19, 2016, Chuah has constantly been developing and improving on innovative ways to make farming more accessible for everyone and anyone.

"With the integration of Internet of Things (IoT) to the concept of hydroponics and aquaponics, people living in the city can grow their own vegetables and fish," he explains.

He elaborates that not many of people today know the difference in the taste of chicken meat that is free-range and the commercial ones sold in supermarkets. Back then, it took him about five months to raise a chick into a full grown chicken.

However, most of the chicken being sold in supermarkets are not organically-grown and only take about a month before being marketed.

Some of the people that I've encountered still say that urban farming is not a viable solution, but they have yet to realise the results will be seen in the long run."

— Chuah

"When you grow it yourself, you will know exactly where the food comes from, what they are exposed to, how they are being raised and so on. Plus, since Malaysia had to import in over RM45 billion worth of food in 2015, most of the produce being sold in supermarkets are imported products," he states as he questions the safety of imported food items.

According to the Statista Research Department, the amount that is being spent on food imports continues to increase year on year. In 2016, Malaysia's imported food was val-

ued at over RM46.77 billion, while 2017 recorded a value of RM51.29 billion.

Chuah believes that by having the ability to grow and harvest your own food, Malaysians will be able to improve food security and safety at one go, ultimately decreasing the level of dependency on imported food products.

Modern farming methods

During the interview, Chuah mentions that the average age of farmers in Malaysia is between 55 and 65 years old, which is a worrying situation. Being an increasingly digital nation, Chuah believes that it's about time the younger generation in Malaysia started planting their own greens and implementing their tech-savvy knowledge into the mix.

He also acknowledges the slow take up rate of the younger generation in the agriculture sector, "I understand that to some people, farming sounds like boring and tedious work. But if we don't start somewhere, are we supposed to just rely on imported foods?"

He points out that the old farming methods also contribute to the slow take up rate, since the traditional ways are still widely practiced.

"The old ways don't fit with the younger generation since they prefer modern conveniences. So we have to change the way we grow the food and change the whole ecosystem, in order to make them feel proud of being a farmer," Chuah adds.

Having a family that supports his ideals, Chuah's two children became the first 'customers' of Urban Farm Tech's products. Eventhough the company is still in its infancy stage, Chuah reveals that he and his family have been cultivating a 2,000 sq ft plot of land located in Bandar Saujana Putra to become company's first demo urban farm.

Unfortunately, one of the biggest challenges that Chuah highlights is the perception of the public thinking that urban farming is merely a hobby, without realising the potential that it holds.

"Some of the people that I've encountered still say that urban farming is not a viable solution, but they have yet to realise the results will be seen in the long run. Of course, just because a new solution is introduced, it will not be able to solve a certain problem in a blink of an eye. But it's important to start somewhere rather than just let things remain the way they are," he cautions.

He cites the example of LED lights and how it used to be an expensive investment. However, in due time, LED lights have become more affordable after the trend of utilising environmentally friendly options caught on.

From seed to sell

When asked how he envisions the future with urban farming being widely practiced, Chuah describes a city filled with buildings that are literally green with plants. Through modern farming methods, Chuah stresses there will no longer be a need for vast stretches of ploughed land that requires huge investments. Instead, people can make do with what they already have.

"Modern farming methods are very flexible nowadays. You can even use a wall to plant your vegetables. Urban Farm Tech products will allow future farmers to utilise whatever little space they have to become self-sustainable," explains Chuah.

Apart from that, urbanites will also have the opportunity to monetise the excess produce that they grow and sell them to friends, neighbours and even supermarkets. "We hope that with our products, our customers can also explore being an entrepreneur," he ends. **MSME**