

The start-up scene is packed with flashy funding announcements, but what really goes on behind the glitz and glamour? In this series, The Straits Times sits down with founders to learn how they developed their ideas, and what it takes to ride the roller coaster of entrepreneurship.



Mr Mathew Howe, the founder and chief executive of agri-tech start-up Grobrix, says that if everyone in Singapore “took it upon themselves to grow their own vegetables, then in theory, we do not need to grow it at commercial levels”. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

The sauce of ex-banker’s inspiration to grow vegetables on walls

Timothy Goh

For Mr Mathew Howe, a classic pesto recipe is not complete without pine nuts, garlic, extra-virgin olive oil and, most importantly, a healthy measure of fresh basil. While the herb is readily available in local supermarkets, he found that growing his own was more cost-effective, and he could also produce varieties that are tastier and more fragrant. His success in growing basil then inspired him to cultivate more types of herbs, vegetables and fruit, but Singapore’s tropical climate meant that most of these crops have to be grown indoors in a compact and well-equipped space. “Growing plants is my passion, and I wanted to combine that with my desire to provide the freshest produce for my family,” said the 41-year-old Singapore permanent resident. Mr Howe’s success with growing basil and making pesto made him wonder if he could make it a community endeavour, and he found his answer during a trip to the barber. “The idea of growing food on a wall came about when I was at my barber... I was staring at the wall behind me while my hair was being cut, and I just thought that maybe we could grow food there and also make the place look a lot prettier,” he said.

Mr Howe is the founder and chief executive of Grobrix, an agri-tech start-up that builds modular, portable walls rigged with the firm’s proprietary technology to optimise light and water for growing indoor produce like basil, lettuce, tomatoes, sage and parsley. Grobrix grows crops in its nursery at Singapore Science Park, nurturing them from seed to seedling for about three weeks before transferring them onto vertical walls. These installations, which range in size from a medium-sized wardrobe to a large floor-to-ceiling storage cabinet, can produce 2kg to 6kg of food per week. The walls are leased to Grobrix’s 60 corporate clients, including GIC, Singtel, Marina Bay Sands and Nexus International School, on contracts ranging from 12 to 36 months, with prices starting at \$1,000 per month. The firm, set up in 2020, handles all the maintenance, including weekly visits to clients to replenish the water and fertiliser mix, tailored to the produce on each wall. Mr Howe, who moved from Britain to Singapore in 2010 and spent over a decade working at a bank here, said Grobrix is not just about growing food for consumption but is also a “lifestyle service” designed to help organisations build a sense of community. Grobrix’s “edible walls” are designed to be decorative, serving as a design statement, much like a natural work of art for offices, he said. They are also a “measurable”



Grobrix builds modular, portable walls rigged with the firm’s proprietary technology to optimise light and water for growing indoor produce like basil, lettuce, tomatoes, sage and parsley. PHOTO: C&W SERVICES

His top three tips for aspiring young entrepreneurs

1

Do something that you’re passionate about, as your business will ask a lot of your evenings and weekends.

2

Do it for the right reasons – don’t just start a business because you dislike your day job and want more flexibility.

3

Understand that there will be ups and downs, so stay the course and carry on.

sustainability initiative that can involve an organisation’s entire workforce. “If you put solar panels on your roof, you can argue that they are a really good sustainability initiative, but nobody’s going to go upstairs and hang out with the solar panels... That’s not the case with edible walls,” Mr Howe said. He said the walls also provide a way for employees to bond through the harvesting process. Staff can also take the produce home to eat. Additionally, the walls serve as an educational tool for students to learn about plant science. “Food is a focus of the service that we’re providing because we

believe that our produce has a way of bringing people together,” he said. Data from the Singapore Food Agency showed that the Republic produced 3.2 per cent of its own vegetables in 2023. Since 2021, vegetable production here has hovered below 5 per cent of total consumption. Singapore’s agriculture sector has also been hit by a spate of closures in recent months due to inflationary pressures, higher energy prices and rising manpower costs, even though the country aims to produce 30 per cent of its nutritional needs by 2030. When asked about the viability of his start-up, and how it intends to contribute to Singapore’s 30 by 30 goal, Mr Howe noted that Grobrix’s business model is different as it does not supply produce, for example, to supermarkets, for mass consumption. “We don’t sell produce. We sell a service that empowers the community to grow their own food... There was a time when communities used to grow food together and support and feed themselves and create a social fabric, and that’s what we’re trying to recreate,” he said. “One can look at food security in a number of ways: It can be producing food at a commercial level and then distributing it to supermarkets, or it can be about finding ways to encourage, enthuse, empower and educate individuals and organisations to take matters into

their own hands.” Mr Howe added that the firm is considering pitching its services to consumers, in addition to large corporations, in the future, when the brand has more visibility, and the technology to reduce the cost needed to maintain the walls. He said: “If everyone in Singapore took it upon themselves to grow their own vegetables, then in theory, we do not need to grow it at commercial levels... If we go back a few hundred years, this is one of the ways we fed ourselves.” Looking ahead, Mr Howe said Grobrix plans to expand its team of 15, depending on the company’s performance. The firm is currently profitable and has no plans to seek venture capital funding. It aims to enter the Middle East market, where there is strong demand for indoor farming, having already established a presence in Malaysia and the United States. Mr Howe, who is married with two daughters, said his biggest lesson from starting Grobrix is that being a start-up founder can be very time-consuming, and his work often eats into his personal time. “It does take something from you, but I try to be present when my friends and family are around. It’s something I need to work on in the future. I want to enjoy seeing my children grow up, and don’t want to have regrets that I missed that because I was doing something else,” he said.