

Organic Greens-in-a-box: Hotel Shows Singaporean-inspired Eco-farming is Viable



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The term “fresh greens” takes on added significance for guests of Batam View Beach Resort, which has been serving organic vegetables grown in-house to be a showcase for a new eco-farming concept.

Just 35 minutes by ferry from Singapore, this four-star Batam hotel demonstrates the viability of the pioneering eco-farming concept by Singapore agro-technologist, Ronnie Chew, who is driven by his passion for the green movement. It is all the more remarkable that this green farming concept has been developed in a highly urbanized country known more for its trading and technological savvy than agricultural expertise.

The secret to success of Ronnie Chew’s simple, yet effective, approach to green farming lies in his radical concept of farm-in-a-box, coupled with the use of fertilizer converted from soya bean waste, another of his environmentally-friendly idea. His green farming concept lends itself to being applied on a small or a large scale.

Touching on his tie-up to use Batam View Beach Resort as proving grounds, Ronnie said the hotel may well be starting a new trend in offering its guests highly nutritious greens that are grown in-house.

“The hotel has consistently got about 500g of tropical greens from each 30-inch by 20-inch recycled styrofoam box for the past six months. Unlike traditional farming, this farm-in-a-box concept fits in with the clean and green environment of this hill-top hotel with beach access,” said Alan Ng, Director of Batam View Beach Resort.

“Infrastructural cost is minimal and there is no complicated system to maintain, unlike other farming methods like hydroponics. Ronnie’s idea is unique and the method he developed is simple and straightforward. So long as there is sunlight, the greens will grow in minimal amount of soil with periodic addition of the Eco-Soya Fiber fertilizer and regular watering,” said Alan.

He added: “Depending on the type of greens grown, the hotel gets a new crop of vegetables from between 18–40 days. Having demonstrated this multi-tier concept farming is viable, we have started to grow herbs. Guests get to enjoy freshly cut greens that were just growing moments before being harvested for the kitchen. It adds a whole new meaning to the term “fresh”. It is healthy eating of greens with all its nutrients at the peak.”

The sight of neat boxes of lush greens in two tiers at the hotel grounds, under a transparent shed to protect the vegetables and herbs from too much water, has both educational and therapeutic benefits.

No smell, no mess and a fuss-free way to grow cash crops may well be the marketing tagline for this Singaporean agro-technologist who spent several years doggedly pursuing his green idea and bringing it from concept to fruition. The tie-up with the hotel showcases the viability of his eco-farming concept, which he plans to take to the next step by going international.

There are two secret weapons in his “green arsenal”. One involves the pioneering method he devised in growing tropical greens in boxes with just three inches of topsoil or burnt soil. Less soil means the vegetables are a lot cleaner upon harvesting. The other secret is his proprietary knowledge in the way he converts recycled soya bean waste into a nutrient-rich organic fertilizer.

“There are about 400 tons of soya bean waste thrown away daily in Singapore which requires energy to be burnt or it is put to use as landfill. Using all natural methodology, I am the first to succeed in developing this process which turns soya waste into organic fertilizer. My Eco-Soya Fiber is also the first in its category to receive the green label from the Singapore National Environment Council,” declares Ronnie

Shedding further light on his brainchild, he said he realized four years ago the potentials to convert soya bean waste and put it good use. After some R&D, it took another 3.5 years for Eco-Soya Fiber to be awarded the green label, as strict conditions have to be met.

“Three tons of soya waste will produce one ton of fertilizer,” he said. Tests with the Agricultural Diagnostic Center, University of Hawaii, show that Eco-Soya Fiber is rich in nitrogen and has more minerals such as nitrate, phosphate, potassium, magnesium, iron, zinc and other minerals, compared with chemical fertilizer. Organic fertilizers are released slowly, which is good for plants that can otherwise be burned by overdose of fast-release chemical fertilizers, he said.

How did he develop the idea of growing greens in a box? Weighing the pros-and-cons, he realized that traditional farming has ingrained weaknesses. In land farming, one has to deal with problems of weeds and insect infestations, such as snails and grasshoppers. Ground temperature also changes with the weather. Growing greens in a box reduces many of these risk factors whilst at the same time offering better temperature control.

“Using the method I developed, it is feasible for people in apartments and landed properties to grow greens so long as there is sunlight combined with proper nurture. These are the keys to my eco-farming approach,” said Ronnie.