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Village Farms educate public on benefits of hydroponic produce

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With a goal of educating people about the benefits of hydroponic vegetables, Village Farms LP, headquartered in Delta, BC, has developed the Barefoot Plan.

"Greenhouse growing allows a lot of efficiencies and benefits," Helen L. Aquino, Village Farms marketing manager, said. "We realize that people today want to understand how their food is produced, but their perception is rather polarized. When you don't understand a complex issue, the tendency is to be either for it or against it. People think either conventional or organic agriculture, but hydroponics are not in either category."

"The Barefoot Plan works to build awareness of Village Farms' green agricultural practices from farmer to consumer," said Ms. Aquino. "We are committed to using hydroponic methods to reduce our ecological footprint. We did not set out to be trendsetters, but from our beginning nearly 20 years ago, our founders, Michael DeGiglio, [chief executive officer], and Albert Vanzeyst, [chief operating officer], have been innovators behind our sustainability efforts. From the start, they recognized that what's good for the environment is also good for business."

Using its Hydroperfect growing system, Village Farms has become a leader in water conservation, land preservation, integrated pest management, recycling carbon dioxide and food safety.

The Barefoot Plan is a five-step program. "The first step is water conservation," said Ms. Aquino. "In hydroponics, plant roots are in a water-based solution. Village Farms sterilizes and re-circulates the same water four times, and 100 percent reaches the plants with no



A Village Farms greenhouse. The company is working to raise awareness of the benefits of hydroponic production.



Village Farms' workers follow hygiene standards to add to food-safety assurances.

waste. Our tomatoes use 86 percent less water compared to the average tomato grown outdoors."

The second step of the plan

is land preservation. Village Farms uses reusable coconut fiber, not soil, to support the plants in the hydroponic solution. With hydroponics, there is

no soil erosion or loss of precious soil nutrients.

Ms. Aquino said, "We use less land to grow more — 20 to 30 times more per acre compared to growing outdoors. A 50-acre greenhouse can produce the same amount as a 1,500-acre farm. We use 70 percent less land to grow the same amount of tomatoes grown outdoors."

Integrated pest management is the third step of the Barefoot Plan. Village Farms' Integrated Pest Management practices uses beneficial insects to control pests and stimulate healthy plant growth. Bumblebees keep plants healthy through pollination. Beneficial predator insects, like wasps, help combat the bad bugs.

The fourth step of the plan is recycling carbon dioxide. "Plants need CO₂ to grow in the process of photosynthesis," said Ms. Aquino. "Carbon dioxide is a by-product of the highly efficient heat boilers used to keep the plants warm. We

pump the CO₂ back into the greenhouse instead of into the air outside. The plants convert it into oxygen, thus enabling us to achieve near zero carbon emissions."

Step five of the Barefoot Plan is food safety. Village Farms maintains extremely high food-safety scores. Ms. Aquino said that it achieved a 100 percent rating during its last audit. It implements Good Agricultural Practices, which is modeled after the U.S. Food & Drug Administration's Good Manufacturing Practices.

Village Farms has executive offices in Eatontown, NJ, and in Heathrow, FL. Its distribution centers are located in Buffalo, NY; Avondale, PA; and Arlington, TX. Besides its greenhouse operations in British Columbia, the company also produces hydroponically in Texas in Marfa and South Fort Davis. It also has growing partners in Mexico and in the U.S. Northeast.

The company is one of North America's larger hydroponic producers of branded, high-quality greenhouse tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers. It markets under the "Village Farms" brand, and it brands for other companies. It also markets for a number of independent growers under its label.

"Village Farms will debut a new booth, number 802, at the [Produce Marketing Association's] Fresh Summit" convention in Anaheim, CA, Oct. 2-5, said Ms. Aquino. "We look forward to introducing visitors to the Barefoot Plan. The plan will be integrated into our recently updated web site, and our representatives will feature it to customers when they meet with them in the future. We also plan to build awareness in the trade and within select consumer publications where interest is shown to be piqued on the natural segment."



A 50-acre greenhouse can produce the same amount as a 1,500-acre farm, resulting in land preservation.