

## LOCAL BUSINESS

# Lagoon-friendly company expands to Vero Beach

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John Hartman has found a solution for the problem of fertilizer pollution, one of the main sources of chemicals poisoning the Indian River Lagoon.

His company, OceanGrown Inc., makes a non-toxic and potentially revolutionary fertilizer composed of concentrated seawater drawn from the Atlantic on the far side of the Gulf Stream that not only feeds the growth of plants but increases the flavor and nutritional content of food, according to multiple university and industry studies.

"We are trying to change the way food is grown," Hartman says.

OceanSolution fertilizer is manufactured at sea. Proprietary equipment that uses magnetics and molecular filters is loaded aboard a 160-foot ship in Fort Pierce Harbor. The ship cruises across the Gulf Stream to get beyond any land-based pollution and pumps water from specific depths where oxygen levels are ideal and concentrates it into a solution that requires no further processing.

"Synthetic fertilizers replenish two or three chemicals in soil, mainly nitrogen phosphorous, but plants need anywhere from 40 to 90 elements for healthy natural growth," Hartman says. "Sea water contains all the natural elements in the periodic table in precise proportions so it has the makings of a perfect plant food that makes ornamental plants bloom brighter and longer and increases the nutritional density of edible plants."

Each batch of concentrate, up to 160,000 gallons per ocean voyage, is tested for pollutants by an independent lab and then shipped to customers.



John Hartman explains his ocean water based fertilizer.

PHOTOS BY TAMI HUNT

The concentrate can be diluted with 50 to 400 parts water before being applied to crops by field sprayers, airplanes, irrigation systems or other means.

Hartman has a thick sheaf of third-party scientific studies that demonstrate the benefits of his product.

Dr. Won Kyo Jung, a researcher at the University of Missouri, tested OceanSolution on rice fields in 2011 and found the fertilizer increased yield by 15 percent, optimized protein content and improved taste compared to control crops fed with traditional synthetic fertilizers.

A 2012 University of Missouri study with a slightly comical aspect but impressive results equipped cattle with GPS collars to track their movement and then gave them equal access to two pastures, one fed with nitrogen fertilizer, one with OceanSolution.

"The cattle preferred the OceanSolution grass five to one," Hartman

says. "Animals can still tell food that has high nutritional content from food that doesn't."

The company has also conducted successful trials with major food producers.

"OceanSolution works incredibly well with commodity crops," Hartman says. "We have done very successful trials with Green Giant."

Hartman demonstrates the non-toxicity of the product himself.

"When we do a presentation or at trade shows, I will take a swig of the concentrate," he says. "You can't drink a lot of it because it tastes like seawater, but it is completely non-toxic and actually good for you."

Hartman established his main facility—which includes offices, warehouse space and test facilities—in Fort Pierce because of the city's small port, which gives his company easy, economical access to the open ocean.

Last year he bought a 2.5-acre prop-

erty with buildings off of 43rd Ave. in Vero Beach for use as a test farm and showplace for crops grown with OceanSolution.

"We will conduct experiments on crops and do school tours and seminars there," he says.

Hartman expects to do \$1.5 million in business this year, ramping up to \$3 million a year in the near future.

"We sell product over the internet to gardeners and vegetable growers and we have commissioned sales people and a lot of direct sales," he says.

"Scotts Miracle grow is buying from us now. They use it in one of their products to address environmental concerns in places where nitrogen bans have been put in place."

Hartman thinks long-term growth, possibly in partnership with a larger corporation, is virtually unlimited.

"Large companies have asked to buy in and that is one path we are considering as we grow the business," he says.

OceanGrown Inc. has received a number of environmental awards, including one for sustainability at the University of Tampa several years ago. When the dean of the university's John H. Sykes College of Business introduced the company as the winner of the "Sustainability Pioneer" award given by the global organization Earth Charter, he described the company's product as "the most disruptive technology I have ever seen."

"It was a very interesting moment," Hartman says. "A hush came over the room, and I do believe that the attendees felt the gravity of what we were about. In 10 years, maybe sooner, all agriculture and fertility will include some form of OceanGrown technology, or the up-and-coming competitors which are sure to come. ■"