

FROM THE LAB TO THE

Since its introduction a little over a year ago, AeroGarden, the first plug-and-grow aeroponic kitchen appliance, has become a smash success

By Tom Alexander

In 2002, Michael Bissonnette, CEO of AeroGrow International, wanted to create a small, attractive indoor garden that would be simple enough that anyone could use and grow fresh produce year-round on their kitchen counter. Bissonnette's company converted fairly complex technology into an easy-to-use system that required no specialized knowledge. The result was a six-plant unit that looks good in any kitchen.,

"We literally started by asking our friends and family if they would like to invest in this idea we had," said Bissonnette. He initially raised around \$2 million privately. "That got us off the ground, with lots of research, a few patents pending and some rather well-developed prototypes."

He raised another \$5 million for more research and development. "By early 2006 we were ready to launch the product, so



Photo courtesy of AeroGrow International

AeroGrow Lab Manager Mica Gross (above) and Laura Dengel (below) tend to more than 600 gardens growing in the firm's 8,000-square-foot research and development lab in Boulder, Colo. The lab is used to study aspects of plant nutrition, lighting and seed selection and for new product development.

we successfully completed a \$10 million fund-raising effort and became a public company."

"There was an incredible amount of work required to take aeroponics/hydroponics from the hobbyist/commercial realm into the mass consumer realm, and most of it was done through trial and error in our lab," said Bissonnette.

Aeroponics is a soil-free growing method in which plant roots are suspended in air in a growing chamber. The environment inside the chamber is highly oxygenated and humidity is 100%. Because the roots are bathed with ideal levels of nutrients, water, and oxygen, plants grow significantly faster.

AeroGrow is currently traded on the OTC Bulletin Board (www.otcbb.com) under stock symbol AGWI, and Bissonnette recently filed for a NASDAQ listing. "As we look to expand more nationally and internationally, we'll be looking at our cash



Photo courtesy of AeroGrow International

KITCHEN COUNTER



Above: AeroGarden's Wall Garden allows three gardens to be grown vertically. Above right: Kids love growing with AeroGarden too. Below: The Strawberry Patch plant kit was launched in February.



Photo courtesy of AeroGrow International



requirements and exploring those options as needed.”

Currently, AeroGarden comes in only one size. It measures 16 inches long by 10 1/2 inches wide by 15 1/2 inches high with the unit's grow lights at the lowest setting. As crops grow, lights can be raised to 21 inches.

“Growing Edge was an incredible resource for us. We bought every issue, and when we'd come across a problem, that would be the first place we would look. A lot of the experts we called on for help, we first met through Growing Edge,” said Bissonnette. “We met Howard Resh, who is on our scientific advisory board, through his cover feature in Growing Edge. We had numerous consultants at different stages, nutrient experts, lighting experts, etc. including some pretty regular contributors to Growing Edge.”

pH and More

AeroGrow has over 500 units growing in its labs, testing new equipment, product line expansions, new plant varieties, new nutrients, additives, and anything else which will make the AeroGarden work better.

During the development process, AeroGrow had to overcome a lot of problems the industry hadn't focused on. One example is pH. To make the AeroGarden user-friendly they had to find a way to control pH from different water systems around the country, with a one-size-fits-all approach that didn't involve pH meters or test strips and drops of acid.

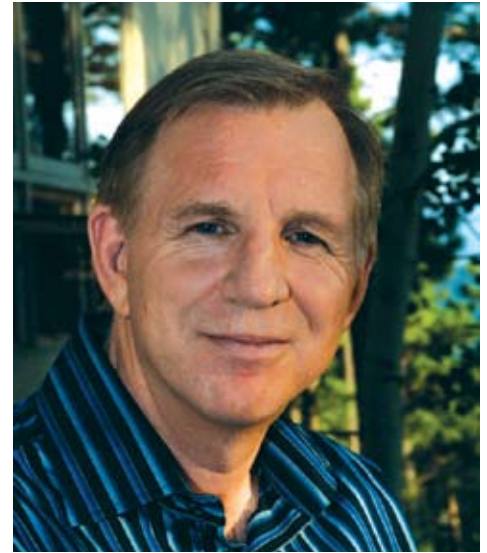
“We spent nine months researching pH control. Now when you feed your plants in the AeroGarden, you're automatically controlling your pH and making it perfect for plants.”

That's just one of 20 or so problems



Photo courtesy of AeroGrow International

Left: Meals are more fun when you've grown and harvested food that's on the menu. Below: Michael Bissonnette is founder and CEO of AeroGrow International, Boulder, Colo.



AeroGrow workers had to become experts on, either through consultants or research trial and error, to solve problems that were keeping aeroponics from going mainstream. “We invested the time and energy into the problems and succeeded.”

The AeroGarden was designed to use with 18 different pre-seeded pods kits, offering a wide assortment of herbs, vegetables and flowers. Strawberries also recently became available.

“We wanted to build the system around aeroponics because it is widely held as the fastest-growing system on earth. We wanted that marketing value, so we built a system where the roots are suspended in air.”

AeroGrow took four years to research and develop the unit before launch. “We made sure it worked because we had raised money from our friends and families and wanted them to be proud of it.”

Bissonnette also wanted to use the term “aeroponics” rather than “hydroponics,” because in market research he would hear people ask, “Won’t the food grown taste watery, like those hydroponic tomatoes at the store?” Bissonnette would have to explain that the tomatoes tasted watery because they were picked green for long-distance shipping to market. “This was a common perception, and when combined with the public’s other perception about

[use of hydroponics in] illegal activities, we decided to use the term “aeroponics” and build it into our system and our brand.”

AeroGrow launched the AeroGarden into the culinary marketplace as its first channel of distribution. “Our market research showed incredible interest in homegrown herbs and vegetables if they could be grown fast, simple and easily, requiring no gardening experience.”

The product is an integrated design, from the lights to the built-in microprocessor that reminds consumers when to add nutrients and water and automatically turns the lights on and off. “The actual physical design of the product was the fifth we had prototyped in our development process and definitely the one with the widest consumer appeal.”

AeroGarden is in high-end mail-order catalogs, available on many websites, including Amazon.com, howardresh.com, nationalgardenwholesale.com, and ncwgs.com. It’s also available in more than 700 retail stores.

The unit was launched on television on the QVC and had five successful showings. A recently produced half-hour infomercial is being shown on numerous cable networks. (Just the other night, I was surfing on my television and came across it. It was well produced, and I ended up watching the whole thing.)

Future Products in Works

The future holds more developments for AeroGrow. “We have a number of new products in development, more fully featured units at higher prices and downscale units at lower prices. There are a lot of accessories in the works too, from kitchen devices that let consumers more easily enjoy the harvests to add-ons that really open up its potential as a serious gardening tool.”

Bissonnette thinks he’s at the forefront of the creation of a new industry. “I truly believe that in five or 10 years from now a large percentage of homes in the United States will have indoor kitchen gardens in them. Whether that is 1% or 20% depends on how well all of us in the industry do it. If we keep putting out great products that really work for people, with the focus on the consumer’s ease of use, the ability to grow a wide variety of kitchen crops, then the market potential is almost limitless.” 🍃

Tom Alexander is publisher of Growing Edge magazine.

Resources

AeroGrow International
www.aerogrow.com

One Heck of A Deal!

Buy all four Growing Edge books
(**Best of Vol. 1, Best of Vol.2, Best
of Vol. 3, Hydroponic Solutions**)
for \$99, including shipping.

That's a savings of more than \$23.

Phone in your book order today.

Call 800.888.6785.

(U.S. orders only. Offer expires Aug. 30. Sorry, this special does not apply to online orders. No substitutions.)

