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Ag-tech firm secures seed money, expects first sales soon

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ITHACA — A company in Ithaca that developed a new farming technology expects to generate its first sales soon.

Aero Farm Systems, LLC of Ithaca announced in February it received its first seed financing. The Quercus Trust of Newport Beach, Calif. and 21Ventures LLC, a New York City-based venture-capital firm, provided Aero Farm with \$500,000.

The money will allow the company to refine the design of its initial product and wrap up some engineering work, says Jessica Bloomgarden, Aero Farm's chief marketing officer. The firm expects its initial sales in the next few months.

The company created an aeroponic-farming system for leafy greens. The firm's founder and CEO, Ed Harwood, developed the system and used it himself to grow and sell greens starting in 2004.

Harwood previously worked as an associate director for Cornell Cooperative Extension and was researching technologies in plant sciences when he stumbled across aeroponics and was intrigued, Bloomgarden says. Harwood began developing what would become the Aero Farm system in 2002.

Although Harwood used the system to grow greens himself, Aero Farm is focused exclusively on selling the technology.

Harwood's experience as a grower is certainly an advantage, Bloomgarden says.

"He has been what our customers will be," she says. "He has tremendous knowledge of any growing situation."

Aeroponics is a type of hydroponics. Aero Farm's specific technology involves growing plants in a type of cloth inside buildings, Bloomgarden explains.

Growers first shake seeds onto the company's cloth. Those seeds then germinate and grow through the cloth into



PHOTO COURTESY OF AERO FARM SYSTEMS, LLC

a nutrient-rich mist, Bloomgarden says.

By not submerging the plants' roots in water, as in other forms of hydroponics, the system delivers needed oxygen in addition to nutrients, she adds. With water-based hydroponics, growers must oxygenate the water where their plants are growing.

That's an expensive process, Bloomgarden says.

Although systems like the one Aero Farm developed are more expensive up front than planting in a field, they offer better yields and faster growing times, she adds.

Aero Farm has two types of customers in mind initially. The idea is that the systems would be set up in old or vacant urban buildings.

The firm is targeting existing growers looking to diversify or take on a more innovative approach to farming, Bloomgarden says. The system also allows for year-round growing.

"This could be an opportunity for ex-

pansion for them," she says. "Our thesis is sort of that conventional agriculture is not as profitable as what we're doing."

The other target market is entrepreneurs interested in urban agriculture, green technology, or food-based businesses.

"One of the great things about the system is that you don't need a huge amount of technical knowledge," Bloomgarden says. "At the end of the day, you're shaking seeds onto the cloth at one end of the system and cutting the leaves off at the other."

Aero Farm's system is meant for commercial-scale growing. The average size installation would produce about 170,000 pounds of leafy greens a year.

The company currently employs four people full time. Bloomgarden says it's too early to project sales or company revenue.

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