

Grads with Organic Strawberry Business WIN Nitsopoulos Award

July 8th, 2011



Marty Verhey, left, and Nico Verhoef stand in their first strawberry patch.

Two Brock graduates who have devised a way to mass produce strawberries have received this year's Nitsopoulos Family Entrepreneurship Award.

Marty Verhey and Nico Verhoef have founded Perfect Patch Organic Growers, a Niagara company that uses leading edge technology to grow strawberries. The unique idea has won them the annual \$10,000 award designed to foster businesses started by Brock graduates.

With a strawberry patch on a Lincoln farm, Verhey and Verhoef, both 23, are pioneering new above-ground technology that allows strawberries to be mass produced. The berries are planted in chest-high troughs so they can reduce harvest labour costs and extend the season, harvesting strawberries both earlier and later in the year.

"Our goal is to grow the perfect organic strawberry in a cost-effective manner on a scalable level," said Verhey. "We see a lot of strawberry farmers with two acres of berries, selling their product at roadside stands. We thought 'There has to be a way to efficiently produce at a larger scale.'"

The pair also won the national Nicol Entrepreneurial Award in 2010 for their concept. They have partnered with Lincoln farmer Dan Tigchelaar to test their growing system.

Verhey and Verhoef, who graduated in 2010 with Bachelors of Business Administration, are no strangers to the business world. Verhoef runs his own landscaping company in his native St. Catharines. Verhey operates a tree farm with his brother and works for his family's business in Ancaster.

The pair will plant their first berries on their test site – which is 1,000 linear feet of trough – sometime this month. They have space for about 4,000 plants.

The Nitsopoulos award is a big boost, they said.

“From a practical perspective, it helps us get off the ground,” Verhey said.

And in terms of morale, Verhoef said, “it’s an award that’s backed by the community. It’s from an entrepreneur who knows the strengths of Niagara.”

The Nitsopoulos Family Entrepreneurship Award was established by the Nitsopoulos family, who own the Quality Hotel Parkway Convention Centre, the Holiday Inn and Days Inn in St. Catharines.

The award reimburses expenditures of the winning company to a maximum of \$10,000. The winners, who are chosen by a review committee, are also entitled to a free consulting session with a Faculty of Business appointed mentor, or the services of the Brock MBA Business Consulting Group.