

FUTUREXFARM

Sunway's urban farm innovation hub

A hub for start-ups and technology partners to run pilot projects, and for those keen on urban farming to get hands-on learning experience



Photos by Sunway FutureX

IN recent months, urban farming — though not a new concept — has risen in popularity. But how does one start an urban farm? How can communities band together to grow their own food?

Sunway Group, through Sunway Innovation Labs (Sunway iLabs), is attempting to address these issues through its recently established urban farming hub at Sunway City in Subang Jaya.

Its FutureX Farm, which consists of three farms — an outdoor greenhouse, an indoor vertical farm and an aquaponics farm — serves as a demonstration site for start-ups and technology partners to run pilot projects for new innovations, as well as to provide hands-on learning experiences for students who participate in the urban farming workshops and courses.

Sunway Group chief innovation officer and Sunway iLabs director Matt van Leeuwen says the group sees FutureX Farm as an innovation hub to drive collaborations, talent development and R&D in agrifood technologies.

Sunway iLabs was set up in 2017 to foster entrepreneurship and stimulate market-driven innovations, and to help entrepreneurs become more competitive. It is structured as a non-profit smart partnership among Sunway Group, Sunway Ventures/Sun Sea Capital, and Sunway University.

FutureX Farm is not Sunway group’s first foray into food sustainability; in 2019, 20 acres of undeveloped land in Sunway Banjaran, Ipoh was repurposed for organic food production.

FutureX Farm took shape following increased interest from students and alumni in urban farming and sustainability.



Sunway Group’s urban farming hub was set up to drive collaborations, talent development and R&D in agrifood technologies

“The idea to venture into urban farming really came from a convergence of activities we are running at Sunway iLabs. Being a not-for-profit initiative, we have worked tirelessly over the last few years to build a unique innovation ecosystem for students, start-ups and the industry at large.

“This ranges from hackathons for students, to accelerator programmes for start-ups and corporate innovation solutions for various industries.

“We started to explore innovations in education to build a robust talent pool with skill sets ready for the digital economy and Industrial Revolution 4.0,” van Leeuwen says.

The group saw that the urban farming scene in Malaysia was rather fragmented. “We have seen farms being built with no one in the local communities to operate the farms in a responsible and sustainable way. Many farms ended up being abandoned and crops were wasted. Therefore, it is important to first educate and train committed teams and individuals in these communities to be responsible for their own food production and sustainability. Then, [we should] empower them with the farm and tools needed to execute and operate their own farms.

“We believe that fresh and nutritious vegetables, herbs and fruits should be made accessible to everyone, which is what FutureX Farm set out to achieve. So, we conceptualised an urban farm innovation hub where talent, technology and entrepreneurs can come together to demonstrate on a pilot scale how modern farming can contribute to food safety and security,” he says.

The Covid-19 pandemic reiterated food access and food safety concerns. “We realised that food supply

The urban farm will also provide hands-on learning experience for students who participate in urban farming workshops and courses



chains were not resilient, which validated our thinking of creating more decentralised farms closer to the communities.

“Ultimately our aim is that within a 5km radius, every urban consumer will have access to clean, fresh and healthy food.

“At the outset, our farms will be growing several types of lettuce, Asian greens such as pak choy and choy sum, and herbs such as mint and basil. These crops are particularly durable, fast-growing and easy to manage. These vegetables are also consumed daily in large amounts across various demographics,” adds van Leeuwen.

Getting all stakeholders involved

The group is studying the market to expand to other parts of Kuala Lumpur, Johor and Penang. “The feedback from our pilot distribution at Sunway City has been very positive and we have managed to collect a tremendous amount of data, which we will analyse and utilise when scaling our urban farms,” says van Leeuwen.

The group is open to working with other real estate owners and authorities that are looking to create sustainable urban farms to feed their communities and turn idle spaces into beautiful green zones.

For urban farming to succeed and fulfil its purpose, commitment from every stakeholder is important.

“For all levels of consumers, from the B40 to T20, to benefit from urban farming, we need to be able to scale urban farms across the urban cities in the country where more than 80% of our population is located. Incentives, grants and funding from the government is needed to help overcome some of the capex costs of setting up these farms.

“In addition, more agri-preneurs and talents are needed to operate farms, develop IoT (Internet of Things) solutions, and analyse data that is generated from the farms,” he adds.

By leveraging technology, it is possible to see how the hub can serve the communities better through regular engagement and education — providing food that is not only clean, fresh and nutritious but which also suits their lifestyle, dietary requirements and community needs.

“Through our website and social media, people can register their interest in collaborating with us on an urban farm project in their own neighbourhood.

“Through these farms, we are aiming to create a measurable impact in new job creation among the youth and the unemployed, and to improve community health and wellbeing, economic growth and sustainable urban development,” van Leeuwen says.



(From left) Sunway iLabs Ventures head Eleanor Choong, Van Leeuwen and Sunway FutureX Farm community manager Koo Tse Chien

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Much of the group’s efforts to impact communities and societies regardless of income group begin with education. “We see education as a key foundation needed to create awareness and inculcate the entrepreneurial and sustainability mindset.

“We have planned a number of activities, such as training sessions and workshops to raise awareness on urban farming and food security, as well as to empower consumers to grow their own food.

“We are partnering with Sunway University and other global partners such as Thought For Food to run Sustainable Urban Farming, short and diploma courses, with the aim to supply more than 1000 agri-talents to the industry.

“This will train and empower more urban farmers, especially among the B40 group, and upskill existing traditional farmers with the latest agritech and innovations. This will benefit university students who have a strong interest in agriculture.

“And we are in discussions with potential partners in The Netherlands to get access to the latest innovations and state-of-the-art research and development on greenhouse and modern farming technologies,” he adds.

In the next five years, van Leeuwen says, the goal is to scale up to more than one million sq ft of farmland across urban cities in Malaysia, producing a wide variety of vegetables and fruits for local communities and adding value to under-utilised spaces in the Sunway Group’s properties. ♦

By Sreerema Banoo