

Business booming for Fresno hydroponic company

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Current Culture H2O, a Fresno-based designer and manufacturer of hydroponic equipment, has enjoyed double-digit growth over the last several years, thanks to a booming cannabis industry.

But this fast-growing company wants to increase its presence with a different type of grower: the small farmer.

Current Culture H2O has designed and built commercial-grade hydroponic equipment suitable for small-scale farmers.

The patented systems use water efficiently to produce higher yields on significantly less space and without soil. That matters in times of drought, when water use and availability are critical issues.

In its simplest form, hydroponics is the growing of a plant in water. In some systems, a medium, like perlite, coconut fiber or gravel, is used to hold the plant while the roots are immersed in nutrient-rich water. Over time, the plants mature and produce fruit or vegetables just as they would if they were in soil.

Hydroponic farming in the U.S. is a \$555 million industry, growing at 3.3% annually and employing more than 3,000 workers.

Daniel Wilson, president of the company, says that with the increased attention on growing food in a more sustainable and efficient way, hydroponics makes sense for small farmers in urban environments and in greenhouses. The closed-loop system also allows for an accurate accounting of water used.

The cost of a small system can start at about \$1,200 and go up, depending on the size.

“These are highly productive systems for the amount of water that is used,” Wilson said.

Christian Long, Current Culture H2O’s vice president, said the company has been riding the wave of cannabis production for nine years. Wilson and his wife Cheryl, have a long history in hydroponics. They owned the Tower Garden Supply store in Fresno’s Tower District where they sold hydroponic systems and supplies.

As the hydroponic business grew, the Wilsons and Long devoted their time and effort to designing and building the systems and created Current Culture H2O.

Today, they operate in a 10,000-square-foot warehouse in northwest Fresno, 4383 N. Knoll Ave., where they employ 13 people. Recently, workers were busy stocking, manufacturing and shipping out nearly 350 different parts for hydroponic systems.

The company sells its products through nearly 900 retail stores. For now, nearly 100% of its customers are growing cannabis, an industry that continues to surge. The U.S. market for legal cannabis is estimated at \$2.7 billion.

Retailers who carry Current Culture products say the company’s reputation has customers asking for their products.

“They have quality products and their system is different than what is available out there,” said Aaron Kelly, owner of Foothill Greenhouse and Garden Supply in Madera. “Compared to most, their system grows plants faster and cuts time off the process. And I can see why a greenhouse farmer would be interested.”

The company has greatly benefited from rise of the cannabis industry, but it also wants to expand into new markets.

Wilson is also seeking investors to help finance its expansion plans.

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Daniel Wilson, president of Current Culture H2O

At the company's factory, Wilson and Long have set up a field trial where more than a dozen pepper plants are growing in one of the company's larger systems called Under Current. Pure oxygen and nutrients are pumped into the cool water that is constantly circulating. The company wants to see how long it will take to harvest the peppers.

Wilson is hoping to encourage entrepreneurial farmers who are interested in farming in a new and unique way.

"It is going to take a pioneering farmer to get this started," Wilson said.

Michael R. Christian, founder of American Hydroponics, a leader in the industry, said the effectiveness of hydroponics has been well proven in the U.S. He said the systems provide small farmers and greenhouse growers with several advantages, including water efficiency, flexibility and reliability.

Christian said there is an 8,000-square-foot greenhouse in Eden, Indiana that grows 24,000 heads of lettuce a month. He said others can produce 24 crops a year and hydroponics use 1/8 the water as soil-grown produce.

Hydroponics farming can produce many crops, including tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, strawberries and herbs.

"It used to be hydroponics was just a nod, nod, wink, wink, word for pot growing," Christian said. "Now it is accepted by consumers as a preferred method of growing high-quality food."

Christian is familiar with Wilson's company and applauds their efforts.

"They are developing scalable commercial systems that are water-based, no media required," Christian said. "This is cutting-edge technology as there is no waste and water is used most efficiently."

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