



# Herb biz goes high-tech

BY CATHERINE WATSON

WHEN it comes to herbs, growing them can be the easy part.

For Casey herbal entrepreneurs Jan Vydra and William Pham, the biggest challenge was getting their herbs to the right place at the right time.

Australian Fresh Leaf's solution — an online ordering and dispatch system for customers and suppliers — led to their being named a finalist for the innovation award in the prestigious Telstra Victorian Business Awards.

Their Freshweb system enables them to dispatch herbs from some 20 growers to arrive in Victorian and Tasmanian supermarkets within 24 hours of an order being placed.

It has been so successful that the company is now licensing other small businesses to use it.

Mr Vydra and Mr Pham knew little about farming when they started Australian Fresh Leaf with a crop of basil in Clyde in 2008.

The company now picks and packs about 100,000 bunches of 17 different herbs and salad items each week.

Mr Vydra said their business was

heavily influenced by television cooking shows. "MasterChef used to buy leaves the other day and we sold 10 times as many as we usually do."

Realising that to succeed they needed to get quality herbs all year round and insure they arrived in stores undamaged, they approached other farmers in Bundaberg and Mareeba, Queensland, to fill in the seasonal gaps in warm-weather herbs such as basil, then developed an online system that has eliminated the need for distributors to sort and pack the herbs.

Their suppliers receive their purchase orders online and can process their own bills. "We tell them six months in advance what we want and when, so they can plan," Mr Vydra said. "A lot of people have let them down in the past, so they appreciate knowing what they need to do."

Neither partner came from a farming background but they said their business background had stood them in good stead in seeking an alternative distribution model. Mr Vydra worked as chief operations officer for a Yarra

Valley produce company. Mr Pham was a banker for 10 years, but a reluctant one.

"The only thing I miss about banking is the Friday night drinks. I was always looking for ways to get out. This opportunity came at the right time. "It was my first dip into this industry and I had to learn very quickly."

The initial site is now the company headquarters and hydroponic operation, with each of the big sheds holding between 30,000 and 60,000 plants.

They have leased another 16 hectares nearby for outdoor planting. They employ up to 60 people, depending on the season.

**The winners of the Telstra Victorian Business Awards will be announced on July 1. They will share in \$500,000 in cash and prizes and proceed to the national awards in August.**



**Growing strong: William Pham and Jan Vydra have brought a fresh approach to marketing herbs.**

Picture: Ted Kloszynski