



Picking the right option

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

Their Freshweb system enables them to dispatch herbs from 20 growers to arrive in Victorian and Tasmanian supermarkets within 24 hours of an order being placed. It has been so successful 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 Herbs with a crop of basil in Clyde in 2008.

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 and Mr Pham was a banker for 10 years, albeit 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.”

Soon after starting their business, the partners realised that to succeed they needed to source quality herbs all year round and ensure they arrived in stores undamaged.

They approached farmers in Bundaberg and Mareeba in 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.

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

said their business was heavily influenced by television cooking shows — “*MasterChef* used bay leaves the other day and we sold 10 times as many as we usually do”.

The initial site is now the company headquarters and the site of its hydroponic operation, with each of the big sheds holding between 30,000 and 60,000 plants. The company has leased another 16 hectares nearby for outdoor planting and employs up to 60 people, depending on the season, with a core crew of up to 20.

After a period of rapid growth, the partners plan to consolidate for the rest of this year before looking to expand. They are looking for another 40 hectares locally and 40 hectares in Queensland, and plan to employ more staff.

The winners of the Telstra Victorian Business Awards will be announced this Friday. 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