Chris Hildreth, BA ’15, founder and president of TOPSOIL, recalls the moment six years ago that marked the culmination of years of education, miles of red tape and a dream he’d cultivated since enrolling at UVic back in 2011. “I wrote my last university exam in the morning, and that afternoon I moved two tons of soil onto a rooftop,” he says.

His dream was to create the highest-quality sustainable food system without chemicals, single-use plastics or, most notably, any agricultural land. And so, with Hildreth sweating in the afternoon heat, TOPSOIL was born—and the rooftop venture eventually evolved into 3,000-plus geotextile dirt-filled containers on 20,000 square feet of vacant land at Dockside Green (which today provides local restaurants and citizens with fresh produce).

To further his goal of bringing food production closer to consumers, Hildreth also developed a “one-stop-shop” farming system that fits into a 20-foot shipping container: it includes growing containers, an irrigation network, a walk-in cooler and a washing station—all of which can be set up almost anywhere.

But a key element was still needed to make TOPSOIL truly sustainable. Hildreth had to determine ways to scale his company and reach as many consumers as possible, thus alleviating problems associated with food transportation, storage and packaging on a grand scale. The task was substantial and it inspired Hildreth—who completed a business minor at Gustavson during his undergrad—to discuss the matter with a team of MBA students.

Midhat Malik, James Mason and Yang Chu, completing UVic’s MBA in Sustainable Innovation, were soon infused with Hildreth’s passion for changing the way the local food system can reclaim community sovereignty and resilience. “This was a great opportunity for us to work on our business development and strategic planning skills with a client who is doing good in the world,” Malik says of their decision to create a business expansion strategy for TOPSOIL as their capstone project. “Chris started at UVic as a business/environmental studies and sociology student and set off to change the way urban agriculture can exist, and now he has this very successful urban farm by-profit business in Victoria. We had a couple of ideas and a strategy for how we could help him grow, to support him in realizing an even bigger impact.”

The students met with Hildreth several times, drafting ideas and conducting competitive analysis. “We researched existing literature, including farming statistics, government regulations and favourable locations geographically,” Chu explains. “We talked to a lot of industry experts as well as Chris’s previous clients.”

Mason adds, “We looked at all the different parts of urban agriculture across Canada, and where TOPSOIL sits. The TOPSOIL system has a lot of benefits: you can pack it up and put it anywhere. It’s very innovative compared to other companies tackling the challenge of urban farming.”

Several months later, the students presented Hildreth with 20 pages of their findings under the title Growing Community Resiliency through Urban Agriculture: a market expansion strategy. “To say Hildreth was impressed would be an understatement. “They did a lot of the heavy lifting, and the report went into forensic detail about how other urban farms function, the technology required and many other valuable business details,” he says. “They literally nailed it.”

Examples abound of how the report may help Hildreth’s company expand. Case in point: it includes a top-10 list of cities in BC that have the permitting and structure conducive to a TOPSOIL operation. The report also touches on after-sales service. “Our research found that Chris’s clients really liked the service or consulting part of [his business],” Chu says. “I think he’s re-evaluated the importance of that service piece.”

Hildreth has come a long way since the afternoon he spread two tons of soil across a rooftop, and he readily admits he was initially driven more by passion than acumen. “Because we started on rooftops the name TOPSOIL seemed to work,” he says, laughing. “I didn’t even know that topsoil is where you grow the food in traditional agriculture.

“It took two years to convince a building developer to let me put a commercial farm on top of their building. I had countless meetings with engineers, then building insurance companies, contractors, farmers and architects. I learned a lot about risks and how I can make it work.”

An equal amount of effort went into the development of his mobile farming system, whose infrastructure was refined to make the farming operations as easy as possible. “We want to systemize everything so that we can entice young people to view farming as a real career choice. For example, there is minimal weeding as we grow in containers and the watering can be automated so you can be blocks away and activate the watering system from your phone,” explains Hildreth.

But a great vision and innovative products still need solid business strategies in order to achieve full potential, and on that score Hildreth is indebted to Malik, Mason and Chu: “I was absolutely thrilled with the outcome of the report and will be using it to take the plunge into the next phase of my business.

“We can’t solve our food problem by just me becoming a farmer; we need more people to grow more food for more people to make any difference. Now we have the infrastructure, knowledge and experience to give other people the best chances for success.”

“UVic MBA student teams complete a capstone consulting project addressing a real business’s need during the last term of the program. To learn more about these consulting projects, contact mbasec@uvic.ca.”