At 16 years old, Claire Reid was determined to start a garden, but the process turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. Stores did not sell seeds and fertilizer on a small-garden scale, and she had no easy way to measure the distances and depths for seed placement to maximize water usage. Adding to her frustration, once the seeds germinated, she couldn’t differentiate between a plant and a weed. It was a cumbersome process to go through just to grow a few vegetables.

Claire had a brilliant solution. She created strips out of newspaper that encased seeds and fertilizer at exactly the right depth and distance apart. She planted the strips, and it worked. Each seed had just the right amount of fertilizer, and as they grew, it was clear what she needed to water and weed. Claire showed her new innovation at her school’s science fair and attracted the attention of the South African Minister of Water. After further testing, Claire discovered her seed strips could save up to 80 percent in water consumption.

THE BIRTH OF REEL GARDENING

Although Claire went on to become an architect focusing on environmentally friendly designs, she did not forget about her invention. Keeping in mind that a quarter of South Africans regularly go hungry, but less than 2 percent of the households...
grow their own food,

in 2009, Claire received a small business loan, and Reel Gardening officially opened in February 2010.

The current product is more complex than Claire’s prototype. The beautifully packaged biodegradable, organic paper strips protect the seeds from predators and UV rays, increasing germination rates by 24 percent. Each box also contains step-by-step, color-coded instructions on how long to care for the garden so that gardeners of all language backgrounds and education levels can use the product. The current product line, which uses non-GMO seeds, allows customers to grow both vegetables, like peppers, beans, lettuce, broccoli, spinach, squash, and carrots, as well as herbs, like parsley, basil, and chives.

Over the last six years, the company has grown from an idea into a multimillion dollar business, and Claire has expanded her scope with an eye to the one billion people on the planet who don’t have enough food to eat. Today, Reel Gardening products — now patented — are available in stores and online in South Africa and the UK, with plans for expansion in the US and the Middle East.

THE BUSINESS MODEL

Reel Gardening is more than a business — it’s a social enterprise. The for-profit arm of the business focuses on high- and middle-income households, while the social enterprise arm targets low-income households, schools, and community gardens. Already 17 percent of retail profits are directed to social impact projects, and

Oxfam South Africa
within the year the company plans to implement a “buy one, give one” model to better supply gardens in low-income communities. To date, Reel Gardening has trained more than 800 women and 1,500 children in organic farming, which has lead its alums to found 16 independent micro-enterprises. In the last year alone, Reel Gardening has implemented 200 school gardens, which have provided the recommended servings of fresh vegetables to over 30,000 children.

**REEL GARDENING’S IMPACT & SWFF’S ROLE IN ITS SUCCESS**

In 2014, Reel was selected to be part of Securing Water for Food’s first Global Call for Innovations. In the first year of SWFF support with $700,000 in incremental financing, Reel Gardening worked with the SWFF Technical Facility to focus its efforts on establishing gardens in schools, serving as a marketing vehicle within local communities. With increased exposure at over 200 schools, Reel Gardening has been able to leverage better relationships with local agent/trainers to represent the company and expand their revenue.

In the last year, the company has saved gardeners 19.5 million liters of water, producing more than 1,000 tons of food over 300,000 gardens, or 30 hectares of land. They have educated over 400,000 South Africans to date, and

Last year, the company sold 360,000 meters of tape, helping people who have never grown their own food before better provide for their families.

“Securing Water for Food has helped Reel Gardening not only attract and leverage additional funding sources, they have provided us with the technical assistance on market-driven business development, commercial growth, and scaling we needed to drive our business forward.”

— Claire Reid, Founder and CEO of Reel Gardening

70 percent of customers can now grow enough food to feed their families and still have enough produce left to sell. Today, Reel Gardening has the potential to manufacture nearly 1.8 million meters per year and maintains a net profit of 34 percent with an operating margin of 47 percent.

Reel Gardening’s success has enabled it to leverage additional partnerships with companies like Unilever, Virgin Mobile, Reach Scale, TOMS, and the Nelson Mandela Foundation to name a few. Reel is also in talks with Coca Cola to determine how they can turn the gardens into the
corporation’s eco-centers in Africa.

**CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Time and resources are limited when a new company starts up. As a result, Reel Gardening found itself lacking effective marketing strategies to expand to new markets and increase sales. To combat this issue, the company introduced a new training program for sales agents, and it expects to streamline marketing approaches, while reaching out to new markets.

In the second year of engagement, SWFF will support Reel Gardening as they add partnerships with 285 additional schools, expand retail sales internationally and leverage online sales through social media. While the company works to implement its “buy one, donate one” model, it is working with SWFF to expand and analyze upper-income markets, allowing them to better serve lower-income customers.

**THE FUTURE FOR REEL GARDENING**

The future looks bright for Reel Gardening. The company’s “Garden-in-a-Box” will soon be available in 120 Food Lovers’ Markets in South Africa, and they are exploring options with Whole Foods, as well as other merchandising and distribution channels in the US and Canada.

The next step for Reel is to build off the momentum it has already inspired with its easy-to-use, visually appealing products and turn it into a movement. Reel Gardening’s newest initiative, the Planting Revolution campaign, is designed to educate young people on the benefits of healthy eating and growing. Supported by Unilever and Virgin Mobile and in partnership with South African Broadcast Company 2 Education, the campaign will feature 26 roadshows throughout South Africa, including South African celebrities and L.A.-based singer songwriter Aloe Blacc. Reel Gardening will also distribute 20,000 Gardens-in-a-Box and engage 1 million children on an interactive app. The app will educate children through interactive games and help collect data for Reel Gardening to help structure future campaigns.

What started in Claire’s backyard when she was just 16-years-old has grown into a company that has reached hundreds of thousands of people with ambitions to expand across continents. Through Reel Gardening, Claire continues to find joy in helping people experience healthy growing and eating.

www.securingwaterforfood.org | securingwaterforfood@gmail.com

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Securing Water for Food (SWFF) taps the transformative power of science and technology and the ingenuity of experts across a broad range of disciplines to bring scalable, affordable breakthrough solutions to the developing world that promote use of water in agriculture.