At 16 years old, Claire Reid was determined to start a garden, but the process was more difficult than she anticipated. She had to buy seeds and fertilizer in industrial quantities, and she had no easy way to measure the correct distance and depth to plant her seeds. Adding to her frustration, once the seeds germinated, she couldn’t tell the difference between plant and weed.

So Claire got an idea. She created strips out of newspaper that encased the seeds and fertilizer at exactly the right depth and distance apart. This way, each seed had just the right amount of fertilizer,
and as they grew, it was clear what she needed to water and weed. After testing her product, she discovered her seed strips could save up to 80 percent in water consumption. In 2009, Claire received a small business loan, and the dream to make gardening easy and fun became a reality: Reel Gardening officially opened in February 2010.

The current product is more complex than Claire’s prototype. The 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. For Claire, this was important because she knew a quarter of South Africans regularly go hungry, but less than 2 percent of the households grow their own food, not to mention the 1 billion people beyond South Africa who do not have enough food to eat.

1 Oxfam South Africa
It’s this goal that has led Claire to run Reel Gardening as more than a business and more like a social enterprise. Already 17 percent of retail profits are directed to social impact projects, and 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, and 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.

A nod to its growing success, Reel Gardening was selected in 2014 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 their efforts on establishing gardens in schools, serving as a marketing vehicle within local communities.

The support has born a great deal of success. 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.
than 1,000 tons of food over 300,000 gardens, or 30 hectares of land. Seventy percent of customers can now grow enough food to feed their families and still have enough produce left to sell.

Today, Reel Gardening products – now patented – have a production capacity of 1.8 million meters per year and are available in stores and online in South Africa and the UK, with plans for expansion in the US and the Middle East.

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

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. With SWFF support, Reel Gardening will be adding partnerships with 285 schools, expanding retail sales internationally and leveraging online sales through social media.

Reel Gardening’s newest initiative, the Planting Revolution campaign, is designed to build its growing momentum to inspire a love for 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. The goal is to distribute 20,000 Gardens-in-a-Box and engage one million children on an interactive app. If their second year is anything like the first, we look forward to seeing what Reel Gardening accomplishes.