

Maryland Urban Agricultural Commercial Lending Incentive Grant Recipient: The Garden International

*Passion for Healthy Living Grows into Superfood Mushroom Farm;
MARBIDCO Maryland Urban Agricultural Commercial Lending Incentive
Grant Award Enables Expansion of New Industry*



Elizabeth Robinson and Cory Moore (above photo) came to farming with divergent backgrounds. She was an accountant for Marriott International, and he was a fitness businessperson for 25 years, opening Golds Gyms for many of those years. What brought them together into the health food industry was each suffering from painful physical conditions. At one

point in her career, Robinson faced stomach issues so severe she had to go on disability at her job. Moore had slipped and fell on ice and suffered a back injury.

Robinson began experimenting with herbs and supplements that would help her feel better, eschewing pharmaceuticals she said made her feel worse. She started mixing ingredients to make a hemp balm and hemp sublingual oil. After various tries, she found the magic recipe that helped both she and Moore recover from their ailments.

“It transformed my life,” said Robinson. “The Gift” wellness products were born from their research and passion for healthy living.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, they decided to diversify and try an indoor crop – gourmet mushrooms. The global mushroom market size valued at USD \$50.3 billion in 2021, is expected to expand at an annual growth rate of 9.7% from 2022 to 2030. After researching how to grow the fungi, Robinson and Moore opened The Garden International. “The two companies mesh together,” said Robinson. “Everything is plant-based.” The two distinct products are manufactured in separate areas of their suite in Beltsville, Prince Georges County, MD.

Mushroom Diversity

Although considered a vegetable, mushrooms are neither a plant nor an animal. They are a type of fungus. Mushrooms are deemed a superfood due to their nutritional contents and are a rich, low-calorie source of fiber, protein, and antioxidants.

The Garden International's gourmet mushrooms are not your common grocery store white buttons or portobellos. The mushroom assortment they grow are peculiar and colorful, full of flavor with different textures you will not find at chain food markets.

They hand deliver boxes of individual or mixed mushrooms to buyers in Maryland, DC, and northern Virginia and ship mushrooms across the country.

The mushrooms that customers will find in the variety box are pink oyster, blue oyster, golden oyster, lion's mane, shiitake, black Mushrooms ready for harvesting king, king trumpet, chestnut, cioppino, maitake, beech, and more.

Fresh mushroom delivery can be one or more types of mushrooms or a variety box that includes two to four varieties depending on size. With this option, mushroom types vary based on the current harvest. In a grow-your-own mushroom kit, they offer the hairy Lions Maine and the brightly colored Blue, Golden, and Pink Oysters.

The Garden International sells wholesale to local restaurants and retail at farmers' markets and direct to consumers. "There is nothing fresher than hand delivery," said Moore. Retail box of mixed mushrooms incubation tent where the mycelium grows. Once the bags are fully colonized with mycelium, they are moved to the fruiting tents for "fruitification" When fructification begins, the mushrooms are placed onto shelves in fruiting tents and the various mushrooms grow larger as they wait to be harvested at just the right time.

"The mushrooms each have different timing," explained Robinson. "They can take from 14 days up to six months from inoculation to harvest. We rotate them through, and the tents are emptied and cleaned frequently."

Growing the Business

Once the business began to grow, The Garden International was ready to purchase equipment and expand to mail orders. They applied to MARBIDCO's Maryland Urban Agricultural Commercial Lending Incentive Grant program.

The program is designed to meet the financing needs of urban farmers by providing an incentive for them to seek commercial lenders for financing for the development or expansion of their agricultural enterprises.

Their \$10,000 grant award, leveraging a loan from the United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency for \$50,000, was used to help them purchase a filtration system, boxes for shipping mushrooms, shipping costs, substrate, mushroom bags, a variety of mushroom spawn, which is the living fungal culture, called mycelium, grown onto a substrate providing the backbone to a mushroom growing operation.

The substrate is the equivalent of “seeds” for a mushroom farm, but unlike seeds, the spawn is grown from selected genetics and cloned for consistent production of a particular mushroom.

“Maryland has some of the best programs in the country for agriculture, even though we are not often thought of as an agricultural state,” said Robinson.

“MARBIDCO has great programs that go hand in hand with commercial lending. Grants are good for beginning farmers as they give you time to learn and improve. You may have to pivot at some point in your business and having the funding helps with making changes when getting started.”

Farming the Product

The shop is kept at a cool 62 degrees for optimal growing and houses five black tents with string lighting and shelving that facilitate each stage of mushroom growth.

First, the substrate is rehydrated and put into five-pound bags and then five to six bags are run through a pressure sterilizer. The mushroom spawn and mycelium are mixed in the sterilizer tent. Next, the mixture goes into the incubation tent where the mycelium grows. Once the bags are fully colonized with mycelium, they are moved to the fruiting tents for “fruitification” When fructification begins, the mushrooms are placed onto shelves in fruiting tents, and the various mushrooms grow larger as they wait to be harvested at just the right time.

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Mushroom Offshoots

Besides owning two health-related businesses, Robinson, and Moore work with Prince Georges County teachers at elementary schools where they supply kits for students to grow their own mushrooms.

Other projects include working on a curriculum for fourth to sixth-graders that will teach STEAM, healthy eating, environmental issues, and how to grow mushrooms.

They are also raising funds for a “Mushroom Learning Campus” slated to open in 2023 – a place for Mycology, discovery, workforce development, a commercial kitchen, and a connection with nature, states their website.

“We have old school respect with a new approach,” said Moore about respecting the earth, using modern equipment, and sharing their knowledge with other business owners.

“We need more urban farmers. We should not be getting our vegetables from thousands of miles away. We need to be harmonizing with local businesses.”

“We thank the MARBIDCO grants that helped us and other up-and-coming entrepreneurial spirits,” he added.