Growing Food, Growing Farms, Growing Community

INTRODUCTION
In 2007, “locavore” was the word of the year in the Oxford American Dictionary. Since then, the term has become associated with a broader movement in the United States which highlights locally-grown food, the rise of farmers’ markets, farm-to-school programs, sustainable farming practices, and many other environmental and economic issues surrounding food production systems. According to the prominent player in the movement, LocalHarvest.org, “the goal of the local food movement is to create thriving community-based food systems that will make high quality local food available to everyone.” Toward that end, one Florida farm, Vertical Horizon in Hobe Sound, FL seeks to join this nationwide movement by serving their small town and community.

METHODS
*GROWING FOODS* Vertical Horizon Farm operation was founded in 2008 as a tiny, backyard hydroponics system, a few trial varieties, feeding family members, and a few handfuls of green salads to friends and neighbors. By 2014, the farm had grown to just under 1 acre, seven hydroponic systems, and 45 varieties of vegetables in production. With diversification of their operation by growing microgreens in a high tunnel as well as hydroponic production of herbs and culinary pants, Vertical Horizon’s gross sales peaked at just over $10,000 per growing season.

*GROWING FARMS* Farm owners Kevin and Natalie have dedicated a portion of their business resources to education and outreach in the world of farming.

TOURS – Their farm serves as an excellent resource for community learning as Vertical Horizon has hosted Master Gardner classes, local garden clubs, and agricultural students from nearby high school programs.

CONSULTING – The farm owners have served as ambassadors around the state, consulting in areas such as crop scheduling, nutrient management, farm layout and design, and integrated pest management. They have even advised and constructed neighborhood garden clubs for prospective growers.

CONFERENCE CONTRIBUTIONS – As members of the small farms movement in Florida, Vertical Horizon has participated in several of the past years’ UF/IFAS & FAME Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conferences. By sharing best practices with conference attendees, the farm owners have spread the word and helped to improve the success rate of farm operations around the state.

*GROWING COMMUNITY* Feeding customers and educating farmers are two parts of the three-fold approach to this farm business model. Connecting to one’s surrounding community is large in important for sustainability in a farm’s long-term livelihood. The Vertical Horizon team serves their local towns as President and Managing Coordinator for the Smart Green Market, where their primary focus is outreach to home food producers and the promotion of local food systems. They have also had their farm’s often-remarked in the initial draft of Florida’s first Urban Agriculture Act.

SUMMARY
WHO CAN BENEFIT

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<th>STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS</th>
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<td>Small farm operators</td>
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<td>Families</td>
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<td>Churches/schools/civic organizations</td>
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1. Home-grown gardens improve quality/freshness/nutrient content of family’s food over a growing season

2. Food safety and security never called into question

3. Food production methods instilled in children allow for a lifetime skill

4. Economic benefit in the long term vs. store-bought vegetables

CONCLUSION
The business model of Vertical Horizon Farm may provide others with tangible, proven practices to enhance prospective and current small farms, families, entrepreneurs, community activists, teachers and many more in the local food movement. Whether the goal may be to simply grow delicious food or pave the way for more jobs in a neighborhood, this business’s approach can be translated into a recipe for action and success.