Garden Hoard Uses Business Contest Winnings to Grow Seed Saving

Hoardling is a way of life for Katie Flickinger and it’s paying off. Dedicated to propagating heirloom seeds from a diverse variety of fruits, vegetables, flowers and herbs, she has seeds from more than 800 varieties of vegetation flooding an entire room, floor to ceiling, in her Livonia home. And she continues to collect.

Through her online business, gardenhoard.com, the master gardener offers homegrown seeds, while providing her consumers with the knowledge and tools to grow healthy, safe produce and beautiful flowers. All seeds come from the gardener’s own seed stock, grown organically from seeds that have not been genetically modified.

“We’re losing some of our most favorable and nutritional fruits and vegetables,” Flickinger said, explaining that 97 percent of original varieties of fruit and vegetable seeds have been lost since 1900. “So many have disappeared, we’re trying to keep them alive,” said Flickinger whose husband Christian, a systems administrator by day, often helps her in the evenings and on weekends.

Farming 1.5 acres encompassing five properties in backyards and community gardens in Commerce, Redford, Walled Lake and her own property in Livonia, Flickinger spends winter on the massive task of collecting, drying, cleaning and storing thousands of seeds by hand. From November to April, gardenhoard.com offers free seeds for the cost of postage on older seeds that are not viable enough to sell, but still have a decent germination rate.
Averaging a 70-plus hour workweek just to keep up with demand, Flickinger was feeling overwhelmed when she learned of Entrepreneur-YOU, a collaborative women-owned business plan contest designed by Walsh College, Huntington Bank, Inforum and Michigan Women’s Foundation. After being selected as one of 15 finalists out of 150 venture submissions, Flickinger was assigned a mentor, Walsh College Blackstone LaunchPad director Carol Glynn.

Flickinger worked with Glynn and her Walsh College Blackstone LaunchPad team, building a business plan and preparing a four-minute pitch for the final competition. Preparations paid off in September, when Flickinger won first place in the lifestyle category and was awarded $10,000 in venture funding.

“I was shocked when I was a finalist and even more shocked when I won,” admitted Flickinger. “I didn’t have a business plan and I didn’t have defined goals when I first met the LaunchPad team. Everything was all in my head. Carol and LaunchPad advisor Brian Renner worked with me every week for more than a month to revise my executive summary, create a business plan and refine and practice my pitch.”

“It was a life changing experience. I couldn’t believe I could stand up there and not faint. In college I would always faint and get sick when I had to present,” said Flickinger who holds a bachelor of science in business administration. “To be able to do this for my own business is an accomplishment.”

Flickinger is moving forward now, equipped with a solid plan and clearly defined goals. She and her husband are also getting the home they have outgrown ready for sale and looking for a place with five acres of land. A move that will allow the gardener to concentrate all growing efforts in one place. “I’m so motivated to get this process under control and to build the garden into something people will want to visit,” said Flickinger whose future plans include offering fee-based agricultural workshops and educational classes. “We love to teach and inspire others and hope that others will pass on what they have learned.”