

Plants of the future...

Launceston is the base for a bio technology enterprise that's growing.

CHRIS Bradford has no doubt that his Launceston-based business, Valcent, is the most exciting he's ever worked with. In a career that has spanned more than four decades and traversed the Americas, it was in North Cornwall that he found the ideal location to set down roots and establish the UK arm of a North American plant-technology enterprise.

Somerset-born Chris spent twelve years working as an independent consultant to the agriculture and food industry in North and South America, before returning to the UK in the nineties and working as business adviser. His life took an unexpected turn when in 2005 Sweetwater Capital Corp, a privately owned Canadian venture capital company, asked if he would set up a UK subsidiary for one of its clients – Valcent Products Inc.

“At the time I was heavily involved with the “Buy Local” Food Campaign” said Chris “but the opportunity to become involved with Valcent was too good to miss. We incorporated the UK subsidiary – Valcent Products (EU) Limited in August 2006, and the past two years have certainly proved to be a challenging but highly rewarding experience”

Today the parent company is emerging as a key-player in the global development of algae-based bio fuels, while the UK operation is using the eco-technology that has been developed at the company's research centre in El Paso, Texas, to create commercially viable growing systems, aimed at meeting the 21st Century's ever increasing consumer demand for locally grown fresh foods. Valcent's cutting- edge systems can drastically reduce the consumption of the planet's resources, producing as much as 20 times more in crop yields, while using up to 95 per cent less water.

“In times of escalating food prices, increasing consumption of water, land, energy and concerns over food miles, this is a system that cares for the environment. If used on a wide scale, it could have a major impact on the pocket of everyone from the farmer through to the supermarket customer” says Chris.

Valcent has also developed a method for sustainably growing rare plants for the commercial market, without endangering the survival of the species in the wild.

“This exciting technology provides a real opportunity to ensure the survival of many endangered species” says Chris.

For Chris, Valcent's UK base in Cornwall, has proven to be ideal. “Locating here has already proved to be a sound decision” he says.

“We are in the company of many other businesses and organisations who share an underlying ethos to better our environment. They are taking a welcome interest in the products we're developing.

“Cornwall is also a great place to live, so we have had no problem attracting and recruiting a team committed to our goal.”

Valcent currently employs 11 members of staff, including three plant science specialists and two horticultural technicians. Supporting Chris in his role as managing director, the company has a sales and marketing manager and a production and technical services manager. “As production expands, we will be recruiting more technicians to assist with the development of our three major projects” says Chris.

Valcent recently launched another of its innovations- Tomorrow Garden- at Gardener’s World Live. “It’s an easy to use complete plant growing kit, aimed at amateur gardeners of all ages and levels of expertise” says Chris.

The attractive growing package contains ‘plantlets’ which are micro-propagated from tiny pieces of plant tissue, taken from mother plants, in Valcent’s Launceston laboratories. These are sealed in a gas permeable plastic bag (which allows air to circulate without any contamination from outside) together with a nutrient gel, which feeds the plantlet, allowing it to develop its root system.

The plantlets can live happily in the bags for up to six months, guaranteeing a long shelf-life in garden centres and gift-shops. The kit comes complete with a re-useable bio-sphere dome and pot and potting compost made from biodegradable coir. Virtually every component of the product has been sourced and manufactured in the UK and the coir has been imported by sea, from a Sri-Lankan fair-trade co-operative.

“Over the coming months our Tomorrow Garden product range will steadily expand and a number of interesting flower species, as well as a range of culinary and medicinal herbs, will become available” says Chris.

“Once we’ve established sound commercial base for Tomorrow Garden, we will then develop our interest in preserving rare endangered plant species for the range. In this respect, we anticipate working closely with a number of like minded organisations, locally, nationally and internationally”.

Cornwall Pure Business has worked closely with Valcent since its inaugural days in the county, setting up introductions with useful business and organisation links.

“I felt that a vital part of our business plan, was to utilise local resources and services wherever possible.” says Chris. “This has already paid dividends. We now have strong links with regional companies including Seed Brand Communications, who have played the leading role in designing the company’s distinctive Tomorrow Garden packaging, the Marketing and PR Company in Launceston, which is creating a national launching platform for our products and Parc Signs of St Austell who helped develop our corporate and product logos.”

“Our location in Launceston’s Pennygillam Industrial Estate is ideally situated, with many of our neighbouring businesses providing us with essential support services.”

“For Valcent” adds Chris, “Cornwall has proved an excellent location for our long-term business strategy to not only flourish, but bear fruit.”

To keep updated on Valcent’s new products visit the company website at: www.valcent.eu .To find out more about Tomorrow Garden, visit www.tomorrowgarden.eu

ENDS