

A light touch: Trio designs, makes specialized lights for houseplants

By Rebecca Vandermeulen, contributing writer, February 1, 2019 at 1:59 PM



Plants grow inside the office of Soltech Solutions, a Bethlehem startup that designs and makes lights for houseplants. - (Photo / SUBMITTED)

Plants help people in many ways but they don't always get credit, said Mike Planer, co-founder of Soltech Solutions in Bethlehem.

Besides looking nice, houseplants improve air quality, research has found. Flora also have been shown to boost mood and productivity, which could explain why more businesses are incorporating foliage into their designs – and why houseplants are gaining popularity among millennials, who are likely to live in small spaces.

Few people, however, want to confine their greenery to a few sunny windowsills, or be stuck with the purple grow lights stereotypically associated with growing marijuana.

They can turn instead to **Soltech**, which offers a line of hand-assembled white lights designed to mimic the sun's light spectrum and blend in with any décor. The lights are targeted at indoor gardeners who want their plants and their homes to be equally beautiful – and who are willing to spend. A small light starts at \$149.

"People love their plants – their 'plant babies,' they call them," said CEO Paul Hodges. "It's our job to make sure they grow."

From solar to Soltech



From left, Chris Clark, Paul Hodges and Mike Planer are the co-founders of Bethlehem-based Soltech Solutions, which makes specialized lights for houseplants. They make the lights by hand. - (SUBMITTED)

Soltech is comprised of Hodges, Planer, chief marketing officer Chris Clark and the occasional intern. Hodges met Planer at The King's Academy in Berks County and Clark at Temple University.

The trio's first venture was Solar for Academics, a nonprofit dedicated to installing solar energy systems at schools in developing nations. Seeing how intermittent electricity impacted these communities led them to explore the feasibility of solar-powered streetlights and LED indoor lighting to grow crops.

They started Soltech to support their nonprofit. Since they couldn't find an attractive light that would help plants grow, they decided to make one.

Initial research and development took about a year. What appears to be white light is actually made of every color of the rainbow. Plants grow best with red and blue lights. That's why many grow lights look purple. After months of trial and error, Soltech found the right balance of green light to encourage plant growth from a bulb that appears white.

"It mimics the sun because it's pure white light," said Planer, who studied energy engineering at Penn State.

They peddled their first model, the Aspect, at home and garden shows. In October 2016 they launched a Kickstarter campaign for an updated Aspect, crafted from glass instead of plastic. Soltech's funding goal was \$9,500. In a month they hauled in more than \$17,000.

"Not only was there a demand, but there was a bigger demand than we thought," Planer said.

Once the high of the Kickstarter campaign died down the company tried getting Aspects on the shelves at nurseries and interior design stores, but those potential customers were confounded by the idea of a white grow light for the home. Clark said the company built its brand largely through online ads and social media, especially Instagram.

"We have a very visual product," Clark explained. "When I tell people I make grow lights, they have no idea what that means."

Maria Failla, host of the podcast **Bloom & Grow Radio**, discovered Soltech's lights on Instagram. She has 80 plants in her apartment in Queens, New York, and uses Aspects as the light source for her living room.

"I was needing a modern solution to having too much low light in my apartment," Failla said. "I was blown away by their modern light that looks like any other light."

Soltech's success means the partners no longer have time to dedicate to Solar for Academics, but Hodges and Planer serve on the board of Humanitarian Social Innovations in Bethlehem.

Soil boom

The company has tapped into houseplants' growing popularity. A search for the hashtag #plantbabies on Instagram yields more than 91,000 posts.

Horticulture consultant Leslie F. Halleck was impressed enough with Soltech's lights to highlight them in her book "Gardening Under Lights."

"Growing indoors with grow lighting allows you to extend your seasons when growing food," Halleck said in an email. "It also allows you to grow many types of plants that otherwise wouldn't have enough light indoors – succulents are a good example."

In July, Soltech moved into its second office at the Pi incubator in Bethlehem. Over the last holiday shopping season they had to work overtime to get through their first backlog of orders – nearly double their season sales projections.

In January the company launched its latest product. The Highland is a track light that is a better fit for growing plants on so-called "living walls."

Soltech is marking it to interior landscapers planning green walls for projects such as restaurants, hotel lobbies and office buildings. These features are likely to require between six and eight lights at a price tag around \$1,000. Signs point to good sales – a report from Transparency Market Research, based in Albany, N.Y., predicts growing worldwide popularity of living walls to conserve electricity in office buildings.

"We just tapped the market," Clark said. "We think it's going to be a huge year for us."

You May Have Missed...

- **Auto-repair software counters customer skepticism**
- **Leadership, planning crucial for managing a crisis**
- **Walkable cities: What will it take for the Lehigh Valley?**
- **How to spotlight what the Lehigh Valley offers: Column**

Write to the Editorial Department at editorial@lvb.com

+ Leave a Comment

0 Comments
