

How food waste inspired Urban Grown - a black female-owned urban farm now supplying Shoprite

Fresh produce company Urban Grown has been established for just six years but has recently secured a significant contract with the Shoprite Group to supply a variety of fresh vegetables close to their source.

Nonhlanhla Mokoena-Chimhandamba and Simbarashe (Simba) Chimhandamba founded the company in Gauteng in 2015, when they were surprised by food waste due to the proximity of farms to cities.

“Urban Grown started with a focus in hospitality and agro-processing when Nonny picked up some stats on the shocking amount of food waste due to proximity,” says Simba.

“We went on to found Urban Grown with a focus on being a reputable, quality supplier of fruit and vegetables within the urban areas of Gauteng, doing our part to curb food waste and establish a profitable business.”

Nonhlanhla’s experience in the corporate world, and Simba’s in agriculture and marketing, gave the co-founders a unique perspective on tackling this problem.

The two used their combined corporate, marketing, and agricultural experience to build the business over six years. They started by supplying fresh vegetables to a leading hotel group but quickly added other outlets to their portfolio.

“Today, the company supplies both retail and hospitality with fresh produce including spinach, baby marrow, patty pans, baby cabbage, kale, and herbs, and we fully own our value chain from production to distribution,” says Simba.

In February this year, Urban Grown concluded a deal with the Shoprite Group three years in the making, which Simba describes as “priceless”.

“We did not stop knocking!” says Simba. “In hindsight, those three years also allowed us to practice with other retailers and hospitality clients, and in this time, we also accredited our facilities for food safety and global best practice.”

The couple kept the Group informed about each improvement along the way, until the retailer met with them to discuss the possibility of supplying fresh produce into the Group’s fruit and vegetable procurement, buying and distribution arm, Freshmark.

“Today, we supply both whole and value-added lines to Freshmark. And the absorption of brands such as Massfresh into Freshmark also present a new approach and a new market for us,” Simba says.

A 100% black-female owned company, Urban Grown now employs 35 people, the majority of whom are women. They also focus on empowering a new generation of farmers emerging from Diepsloot and Hammanskraal, and 26 of their employees are youth.

“We consider ourselves custodians of the black farmer’s reputation - where instead of crying about the hardships and inequalities that exist in the agricultural place, we embrace clients like Shoprite that have given us an opportunity and do them proud by honest hard work,” says Simba.

“I believe that what Nonny and I have built is living testimony of a South African success story, made possible by the Shoprite Group.”