

Green innovator sets his sights high

Mr Zac Toh has been scaling new heights with his green roofs, which are covered with growing plants.

Yesterday, the 25-year-old was crowned Singapore's Young Green Innovator of the Year for pioneering green roofs at his family's firm.

When appropriately designed, rooftop greenery has many benefits, including better air quality, lower temperatures and increased energy efficiency.

He was one of 16 winners recognised by the Singapore Green Building Council (SGBC) and the Building and Construction Authority (BCA) at the second SGBC-BCA Sustainability Leadership Awards. The awards recognise people, buildings and businesses for being green and sustainable in an innovative way.

Mr Toh was supposed to begin his business degree at the Singapore Management University about five years ago. But he began working at his family's company Chop Ching Hin, which supplies landscaping products, and set up a subsidiary that focuses on urban green technology called GWS Living Art.

He found the work so interesting and challenging that he chose to develop and sell green walls and green roofs. It has paid off.

He counts about 150 projects under his belt in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Hong Kong. For example, he set up some of the green walls in Changi Airport.

He is particularly proud of his green roofs. Standard green roofs for grass require a soil depth of between 10cm and 20cm, which makes for heavy roofs – at 120kg to 220kg per sq m. His company's roofs require only 35mm to 50mm of soil, weigh only between 25kg and 60kg per sq m, and are also pre-made.

Set-up time is therefore dramatically cut compared with standard green roofs, and they are much easier to maintain. Despite this, he is still a bit of an outsider in what he calls a "conservative" industry.

"When we first started out, about 90 per cent of potential clients doubted us," he said. "It's encouraging that we're being recognised for going against the grain."

The council and BCA also announced two new initiatives yesterday. The SGBC-BCA Green Facilities Management Accreditation Scheme will accredit firms that know how to manage Green Mark-certified buildings. It is a way to recognise managers for running green buildings in the most environmentally friendly way possible.

The SGBC-BCA Zero Capital Partnership scheme will link firms with light-retrofitting companies so they can use more energy-efficient lights.

Companies will not need to pay for the retrofitting, as they can make use of financing options like BCA incentive schemes. The guest of honour at the event was Minister for National Development and Second Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong, who spoke about the aim to green 80 per cent of Singapore's buildings by 2030.

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