

**hotseat** David Marks



**IN THE SPOTLIGHT:** David Marks, the founder of Levity Crop Science, in his glasshouses at Lancashire University's Environment Centre

# Seeing real growth

He helped found one of Lancashire's most pioneering companies, now DAVID COATES finds David Marks doing the same again.

**D**AVID Marks clears away some glass bottles from the table as he sits down.

The bottles, I remark, look like something you would find in a high school science class containing a live frog ready for dissection.

"No, no, they usually have something like this in them," he replies handed me another bottle with a strange-looking green liquid.

Welcome to the world of crop science. It's not all men in a laboratories and or wandering through vast fields of crops, although David admits that he spends more time overseas than he does in this modest office at Lancaster University's Environmental Centre.

His business is essentially creating products which ensure that for every hectare of crop grown in the world, there is more to feed people.

David says: "Fertilisers and pesticides have been successful. If you look at it, there is now four-times as much food around as there was 40 years ago – but there are five-times as many people.

"The way we have gone about it is not sustainable, we are completely dependent on chemicals to feed half the world's population. If we tried to do it organically it just would not happen.

"What I try and do is look at ways to grow more crops from less material."

He has some pedigree in this. Originally from inner city Birmingham, he came to the North West to study plant physiology at university in Liverpool, but rather than following the usual path of getting a PhD he got down to putting his knowledge into practice.

It was ten years ago that he worked for

a government research hub before becoming a director at US-based fertiliser specialist Stoller's facility in Standish, just outside Wigan.

But in 2003, with his own ideas growing stronger, he decided to go it alone and was part of a consortium which set up Plant Impact, a biotechnology business which later arrived in Preston.

Here he created a number of the products still being pushed by the stock market-listed business and earned his Young Scientist of the Year award.

Six years later, having helped pioneer these technologies, he parted company with Plant Impact under what can only be described as something of a cloud.

In 2009, the company announced his contract had been terminated with little further detail and later hurried out an announcement to its shareholders that it had struck a severance package with its former technical director.

"We came to an agreement," the 37-year-old says, "that's all I want to say about it really. I wish them well but I have other things I am doing now."

That is his latest business venture, Levity Crop Science, which is essentially repeating the exercise albeit with a number of his products far more developed than when he started out with Plant Impact.

I meet him as he has just finished his first year in business and made a £50,000 profit; not the kind of mega-bucks you would imagine from a product destined to be part of helping feed the world, but the ambitions are far from realised.

He says: "I want to treble that this year and get into tens of millions by 2016."

Those ambitions sound more on par



“

**I am extremely ambitious but what motivates me isn't just money – it's wanting to improve things**

with the potential of the products we are talking about – but are they fanciful for a company operating out of a single office at a university?

Perhaps not, when you consider Lancaster is behind only Oxford and Cambridge for its success in the field of research and is a top 10 university, not to mention the calibre of customers the scientist is already working with.

Levity's business boils down into three parts – working with multi-national chemical companies to look at ways to turn their waste product into something they can sell; helping develop existing agricultural manufacturers and developing his own range of products.

It is the first, where he is looking at turning something which currently costs companies £70-a-tonne in landfill tax into something they can sell for millions, that has helped drive profits thus far, but this year is likely to see his own products come to the fore, insists its founder.

"I am already working closely with a Spanish company, I should be started in Argentina next month and Brazil before the end of the month," David says pointing to a map of the world on the wall of his office dotted with stars across Africa, Europe and South America showing where he has started work.

"I made an investment to start up a company and a year later I am making a profit which is unusual in my industry.

"I am extremely ambitious but what motivates me isn't just money, it's wanting to improve what is out there.

"Already there are millions of people starving and that is not right. The only answer is to get them growing more crops."