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It's really, 'white gold' from Asia

Swiftlet farmers become rich by selling edible bird nests, disposing of their successful swiftlet farms or even by doing both.

This is according to "one of the most successful swiftlet farm operators in Malaysia", Dr Christopher Lim who holds the record of achieving "the second fastest growth rate in edible bird nest production" in the country.

Having gone through an "immense learning curve", this millionaire swiftlet farmer knows what he's talking about.

Involved in swiftlet farming since June 2005, he now operates two swiftlet farms, part-time. One is a shophouse and the other, a bungalow, both located in Pahang.

On occasions, he conducts seminars on swiftlet farming. But, full-time, he's a senior medical lecturer and head of the Nephrology Unit at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Besides teaching commitments, Dr Lim provides regular clinical consultancy services to the Serdang, Putrajaya and Kajang hospitals.

The kidney specialist also has a keen interest in clinical research and has published numerous original research findings in international medical journals.

So how does swiftlet farming fit in for him?

"I clean up swiftlet droppings, harvest the nests and thoroughly check all the electrical components including humidifier, audio system and timers at the farms once very four to six weeks to make sure everything's in good working order," he explained.

A successful farm, he elaborated, should be able to produce one edible bird's nest in each square foot, every four months. A standard 20ft by 70ft two-storey shophouse with a built-up area of 2,800sq ft should thus produce 2,800 nests every four months.

This adds up to 8,400 edible nests a year and assuming that the selling price is RM4,500 a kilo, the return on investment would be RM342,000 a year.

He said the swiftlet population follows exponential growth until nesting spaces are saturated, usually in five to seven years. When that occurs, the existing swiftlets do not migrate, so owners can still earn handsome sums.

The new swiftlets born in farms would have to go and find new homes – so this is when the farm has to be expanded.

On wealth from capital appreciation, he said a successful farm would in two years of operation have at least 500 nests.

An investor who buys a shophouse for RM250,000 and spends another RM60,000 to convert it into a swiftlet farm will be having a swiftlet farm worth at least RM810,000 after two years. This works out to a 161 per cent return on investment – or the original purchase price, plus conversion cost and the market price of RM1,000 per edible bird's nest.

Dr Lim said one can also make money from swiftlet farming by being a middle-man in edible bird's nest trading, by processing the nests for the local and foreign markets, exporting them or even



Swiftlets building edible bird nests on the corner boards of a swiftlet house.

by designing and building swiftlet farms.

It is possible, he said, for a swiftlet farmer to become a millionaire within three years.

However, the sad fact is that more than 80 per cent of these farmers don't make their first million ringgit even after five years in operation.

Some end up poorer because of poor insight and wrong application of swiftlet farming techniques.

This especially happens to "copycat" farmers who have poor knowledge of swiftlet behaviour, those who carry out farming in the wrong location, design

their farms improperly, or have had their operations closed by the local authorities.

Copycat farmers are investors who know little about swiftlet farming and copy wholesale the successful farms nearby.

While such farmers might become successful initially, it will not last, especially when more copycats arrive.

To become successful, Dr Lim said farmers have to, in addition to taking calculated risks, think out of the box, understand farming principles and design farms that resemble the natural habitat of cave swiftlets.

That means the right light exposure must be there, besides correct humidity and temperature, accurate installation of audio players and tweeters with the right type of swiftlet sounds, and appropriate concentration of aroma.

"Compared to 20 years ago, swiftlets in Malaysia are now spoilt for choice. If they don't visit and stay at your farm, there are over 25,000 swiftlet farms beckoning... one cannot afford to make mistakes," Dr Lim said.

For more information, surf to www.swiftlet-farming.com.my