

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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The Missing Key to Automation

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The future was drawn for me in crayon.

“Look dad,” my 7-year-old said, pointing to the light blue construction paper. “Here’s the potting machine ... and these are robots. This one puts the pots on, this one does the planting and this one puts them on the trailers.” He gave me a confident, quizzical look, as if to say, “When can we start?”

That was more than 10 years ago, back when I paid my workers \$8.51 an hour. His childish daydreams entice me more and more every season. Since then, we’ve both grown up quite a bit. We’ve had the “where do babies come from” talk, but now that he’s about to begin his senior year of high school, I realize we’ve yet to have a “where do robots come from” talk.

Here it is, son: automation is born when three ingredients come together—technology, capital and standardization.

That last one is the biggest problem. Nursery growers belong to an ornery fraternity. We share common concerns and heartfelt, mutual support. We’re friendly competitors; we have few “trade secrets.” We’ve been borrowing ideas and production practices from each other for 50 years, but we’re also a fiercely independent bunch.

Past proposals to “standardize” things have been met with icy resistance. “Don’t tell me what to do,” we have said (or thought). “Don’t pretend you know what’s best for me.” Trust me, I was one of those voices. But things are different now and the time is right to move toward standardization.

Three reasons why now is different:

The wild mustangs have been “branded.” Most nursery growers have integrated branded material into their production, and these brands have come with new standards and practices we’ve been required to adopt—whether we wanted to or not (such as container size and volume). Some of our “fierce independence” has been tempered because the changes we were forced to make ... well, they turned out not to be so bad after all. (What were we so upset about?)

It ain't welding. Many nursery growers have historically been very innovative. We've made our own potting machines, wagons, trailers, conveyors and even mechanized pruners. But the equipment we need for the future requires more skills than welding. We recognize we won't possess, within our own companies, the sophisticated engineering and fabrication capacities we'll need.

The end is near. Most of us can see the "writing on the wall." The labor situation isn't going to magically get any better. We have to do something.

Right now, this is all just talk. Nothing official is going on, but as the leader of the Nursery Community Connector group for AmericanHort, I've been chatting this up. (Not everyone agrees with me!)

Here's what I'm proposing: nursery growers and allied suppliers should examine ways our industry can standardize areas of production and material handling in order to increase efficiency through automation. I believe the prime areas to consider include containers, growing area configuration and shipping/transportation.

The overall goal of implementing standards (and automation) is to have fewer manual labor touches (moving, spacing, pruning, fertilizing, etc.). A secondary goal is to have those touches be of higher quality (less variability) and greater speed than manual touches. A third (rather obvious) goal is to have the automated touches cost less than manual touches.

Personally, I have acreage I'm hesitant to develop because the last thing I want to do is build a nursery with all the same problems and mistakes I already have. I would dearly love to have a general guideline for things, such as bed size, road width and irrigation placement. And I don't care if it's "not the way we've always done it." I want the future to look different, but I just don't know how it should look.

The truth is, none of us know what our nurseries should look like. Our visions of the future aren't much clearer than my son's crayon drawings.

Where do we go from here? I suggest we spend some time talking informally. If you'd like a more complete summary of my ideas, send me an email and I'll send along the full document. If there's any consensus, the next step (probably a year or so down the road) will likely be to assemble a more formal working group, secure some funding and hire some people who know a whole lot more about this (engineers, I assume) who can answer the key question: What parameters matter most to the people who will design the robots we dream of employing? Let's voluntarily standardize those key parameters as much as we can. **GT**

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