GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Welcome to the Future

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Flying cars. Robots. Smart homes. Video phones. Space tourists.

That's what the forward-thinkers of 1975 envisioned for the far-off, futuristic-sounding year of 2025. That's today, people! Fully a fourth of the way into the 21st century!

Cars may not yet fly (four out of five ain't bad), but time sure does. Seems like only the other day that we were worried about Y2K. (Ha! "Just the other day" … do you ever catch yourself saying that when referring to some event from your distant past, like your grandmother does/used to do?)

I got my first real job in 1976, pumping gas for minimum wage—$2.30 an hour. Today, the federal minimum is $7.25, which seems ridiculous, knowing that the gas I was pumping cost 50 cents a gallon, meaning I had to work 13 minutes to buy a gallon for my hot-rodded '69 Ford station wagon. Today, a minimum wage-earner paying $3 a gallon has to work 25 minutes, or about double what I did, to afford the same gallon for his Civic with the body kit and loud exhaust. Of course, I got about 10 miles to the gallon, and today's gearhead gets 30, so he's really making out better than I did. But what does a car cost today? Plus, I didn't have to buy a $1,000 phone every couple of years.

Speaking of which … Steve Jobs' iPhone sure changed things, didn't it? The prognosticators of 1975 may have envisioned the video phone, but theirs was a big desktop box that at best resembled the iMac from 1998. But the smartphone—it has revolutionized horticulture and our ability to communicate, work, report, record and control things from anywhere. Snap a picture of a crop and text or email it to a technical expert, look up a cultivar name and adjust your environmental controls, all from a pocket-sized device that can perform 35 trillion operations per second. That's the stuff of "The Jetsons"—and George and Jane lived in 2062!

Conversely, there's one piece of greenhouse/nursery technology from the 1970s that has changed very little over time: the shipping rack. The first mention of racks in GrowerTalks was in 1973, when then-editor Vic Ball visited M.V. Nurseries of Richmond, California … what would become Color Spot Nurseries 20 years later. M.V. stood for Michael Vukelich Sr. His nursery was less than 10 acres at the time, but Mike had developed a unique marketing idea: shipping product to stores on custom-made display racks that he would set up for customers on consignment. M.V. was even providing in-store service!

A few years later in 1977, Denmark's Container Centralen developed a standardized rack and a logistical system for distributing flowers and plants across all of Europe.

Today, millions of shipping racks move to and from tens of thousands of greenhouse and store locations, making it possible to move many truckloads of plants quickly and efficiently.

Then there's pest control. In 1975, chemicals were broad-spectrum and harsh. Temik, anyone? I sprinkled out plenty in my day. Today's products are more targeted, safer for people and the environment, and there are probably more of them, including biological and bio-based controls. Alas, we still have pests and they're still the No. 1 bane of most grower's existence, as they were back then.

Or is labor No. 1? It wasn't much of a topic in 1975. Labor was cheap and plentiful, or so it seemed. Skim an old GrowerTalks from back then and you don't find any complaints about it. Today, it's all we talk about. I mentioned the federal minimum wage earlier; I doubt 10% of you pay that little. There's just too much competition for workers—from fast food to Amazon warehouses to driving for Uber … In our 2023 Wage & Benefit Survey, respondents averaged $17.89/hour for general labor. And that's if they can find warm bodies willing to stay past lunchtime the first day!

Today, it's about labor-saving tools. In 1975, we were on the cusp of mechanizing the greenhouse. We had pot fillers (Javo made their first in 1969). We had wagons and carts. We had conveyors. The Dutch firm Hawe had just introduced the world to moving container benches. Seeders and plugs came in the 1980s, followed by transplanters, followed by today's cutting stickers, made possible by vision systems, computers and robotic arms.

Hmmm ... Rosey on "The Jetsons" had robotic arms … I'll bet she was a heck of a gardener! **GT**