

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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In a Greenhouse, Not So Far Away

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When my siblings and I were young, we'd watch the "Star Wars" trilogy over and over again. I remember being amazed at how droids were everywhere, mingling with humans, working next to them and providing the technology to fight the Empire (because, of course, we were on the side of the Rebels).

Those movies seemed so, well, out of this world—like that technology was only a figment in the gray matter of George Lucas. In our lifetimes, we would never see a droid project a message or use lightsabers.

Fast-forward to the 2000s, where telephone land lines are thought of in the same vein as rotary phones, driverless cars exist and you can order food without actually talking to a person. No lightsabers yet, but you gotta think that somewhere, someone is fiddling with the possibility.

Back here in the real horticulture world, you're dealing with labor shortages and the demand to grow more using less. It creates the perfect environment for new technology and innovation. I feel like there's been so much happening in this sector of our industry it's been hard to keep up.

And it's not even with just pot fillers and bale breakers (although there continues to be great improvements made to these machines). Every year at Cultivate and IPM Essen, we're seeing amazing new equipment to help growers be more efficient.

This month's cover shows an outstanding example of this. What you're seeing are some of the biodegradable strips that hold unrooted cuttings for the AutoStix machine from Visser and Ball Seed.

I know my boss Chris Beytes has always been a lover of machines and greenhouse equipment—he's a natural tinkerer, so it makes sense. Earlier this year, Chris visited George Sant & Sons in Ontario, Canada, to get a look at one of five AutoStix machines that are currently being tested in North America. He spoke briefly about it in one of his *Acres Online* newsletters at the end of March, but he goes into a lot more detail to give you all of the information you need.

Chris mentioned in his original reporting that he's often called cutting-sticking machines "the Holy Grail of the greenhouse" and now machinery companies are delivering. Exactly one year ago this month, we had the ISO machine that also sticks cuttings on the cover—will this become a trend? As the labor "issue" evolves into more of a full-fledged "crisis," I believe it will.

The ISO robots were designed especially to counter the cost and lack of labor, said Hans de Vries, owner of the company that designs the machines. A few years ago, they reorganized and cut their workforce by 25%; coming up with a machine that could pick up the slack became imperative.

"With robots, we can do our work much easier; they are so much better equipped to work than people," he told Chris.

The AutoStix and ISO machines may not be as cute as R2-D2 or as charmingly smug as C-3PO, but they're just as helpful to us humans. It's exciting that cool new technology like this is finding its way into the greenhouse. **GT**