

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Where Plants and Tech Meet

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I'm not a Luddite—I'm a 30-year Mac user, I can control the Pandora tunes throughout my garden from my iPhone, and I'm on my third drone (don't ask about Nos. 1 and 2). But when it comes to the merging of technology and plants, I'm a skeptic.

Don't get me wrong: computers absolutely have their place in the modern horticulture business. I'd have killed for a decent environmental control computer instead of the two-stage Dayton thermostats I had in my Florida greenhouse. At retail, POS systems are a must. And what businessperson can live without a smartphone?

But I draw the line at algorithms.

Now, I will admit, I don't know exactly what an algorithm is, other than is what MIT researchers say they're going to use to build a box that will grow perfect plants without any human intervention whatsoever.

Hogwash.

These eggheads, who've probably never even grown a sunflower in a Dixie cup, think they can produce perfect, "nutrient-dense" plants, free of insects and diseases, in a closed box using nothing but a computer and an algorithm? Yup, and they're working on it as you read this. They call it a "personal food computer," and with it, they hope to solve the world's food crisis.

While noble-sounding and compelling, the idea is fraught with problems. Pest free? Have these guys never had a plant in their dorm room? Aphids, mealybugs and root rots come seemingly out of nowhere. No algorithm will prevent that (unless one of the things it activates is a weekly preventative spray).

Second, the hungry people of the world do not want leafy greens. They want one of the world's top 10 food crops—rice, corn, plantains, soybeans, yams and the like. You can't grow those efficiently in a box, no matter how large. Nor apples and oranges.

But I'm not here to bash tech. Tech is highly popular these days and we should be capitalizing on tech to get more people interested in our world of growing and gardening.

How do we do that?

In spite of my criticism, the personal food computer has attracted loads of media attention and is probably getting some kid somewhere excited about a career in agriculture. That's a good thing, even if the food computer premise is a bit far-fetched.

Folks love their smartphones and consumers expect to find apps for just about anything they're into, so garden apps like GrowIt! and Armitage's Greatest Garden Plants and hundreds of others make sense, even if you aren't into them. I doubt there'll ever be one that dominates, Google-style, but that's okay—there's room for many specialized apps for specific topics or needs.

We like to control things with our phones, like I do with the music in my garden. I was impressed when I first saw the Parrot Pot. From the same folks who make the Parrot drone, this self-watering flower pot has built-in sensors that you can monitor and control with your smartphone. (Alas, it's no longer sold. I wonder what that means?)

Tech doesn't have to be useful. One of my favorite tech toys is the zero-gravity plant pot called LYFE, which got its start on Kickstarter. It uses magnets to hover its pot and plant in midair. Give it a gentle spin and it will keep spinning. The crazy thing is, the pot, base and AC adapter go for \$300! (tinyurl.com/lyfepot)

I encountered a goofy plant/tech crossover in the Netherlands in January: a pot that plays piano notes when you touch the leaves of the plant in it. It also works as a Bluetooth speaker for your music system. You can get these on Amazon for about \$6.95. Like I said, goofy, but it's a way to attract consumers to our products via tech. (tinyurl.com/pianopot)

This whole topic was inspired by my new favorite plant tech item: a six-legged, crab-like robot that carries a plant on its back, moving it from sun to shade as the plant requires, and doing a little dance when the plant needs water. I smiled when I watched the short video clips. The robot, called HEXA, is available for robotic developers to experiment with (for just \$949!); the plant portion of it was just an exercise by the developer who noted that humans have made cars and planes and rockets so we can travel faster and farther than nature or God intended. Maybe plants are tired of being stuck in one place and would like to be mobile, too. (tinyurl.com/walkingplant)

I like that notion. If cats can ride on Roombas, why can't catharanthus? **GT**