

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

3/1/2019

Automating Perennials

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A crew at Hampshire Farms uses Visser's AutoStix to stick unrooted perennial salvia cuttings. The suburban Chicagoland perennial specialist first tested the AutoStix system in late 2018 and now plans on sticking at least 75% of their 2 million unrooted cuttings by machine.

Says Production and Operations Manager Jason Fatten, "I don't think we'd be able to continue to produce our own plugs here in-house without the machine."

Hampshire Farms and other perennial growers can thank annual and potted plant growers for making the R&D investment in the newest crop of mechanized and robotic cutting stickers like AutoStix and ISO Group's Cutting Planter. A quick survey of Visser and ISO Group owners reveals at least a half a dozen that are sticking perennial cuttings via one of the two machines, including Corso's, Metrolina, Pacific Plug & Liner, CK Greenhouses and Olson's Greenhouse. Many others say they plan on adding perennials to the crops they stick.



In Hampshire Farms' case, they source AutoStix strips from Darwin Perennials and Dümme Orange, stick the cuttings into 128- or 72-count loose-filled trays, then after rooting, plant the plugs with a Visser transplanter, making the whole process automated.

There are still plenty of perennials that need to get planted by hand, such as daylilies and hostas, but Jason says they can source about 90% of their variety list in an AutoStix strip. They'll run the machine steadily from winter through the spring, then start fall planting in July and run steadily through

October—virtual year-round use.

As for payback, Chris Hanson, Hampshire Farms' Director of Operations, says, "It costs about 2 cents for a human to stick a cutting. It costs about 2 cents for the machine to stick a cutting. But that's not the math. The math is spending the 2 cents to have the machine stick the cutting vs. buying a plug for 45 cents."

And, he adds, having your people available for less menial tasks.

"We'd much rather have them *run* the machine than *be* the machine." **GT**