

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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## My Best Investment

*Bill Calkins*

We've all made investments—good and bad—and hopefully the cost has been recorded and payback measured. Some pay off quickly. Some pay back slowly. Some never do. But any business must continue to invest and most likely gain knowledge and improve decision making over time.

GrowerTalks reached out to a handful of experienced growers and asked about recent good investments. Here's what we learned.

### Office efficiency

Tom Van Wingerden, sales director at Van Wingerden Greenhouses in Blaine, Washington, says their best greenhouse investment in the past five years has been software that properly fits the business.

"We have been stuck in the 'Microsoft Office World' for a long time and have struggled to transition into a system that better integrates with the business. After losing some people with some significant tribal knowledge, we made the decision to start developing our own software tools that have slowly started to morph into a full software system," he explains. "We aren't there yet, but it has helped us reduce a lot of manual office labor and increase our awareness of what is going on in our greenhouses."



### Propagation lighting

Lucas Greenhouses in Monroeville, New Jersey, recently made the switch to LED lighting for young plant propagation, according to head grower Joe Moore.

"The first thing that stands out to me would be the massive amount of investment that we've made the last two years into LED lighting systems for our young plant side of the business. It's been amazing to see what

kinds of difference lights give us in growing out consistent liners, no matter what the weather is at any given time during the propagation season," Joe says.

Head young plant grower Tom Gunther goes on to explain overall crop quality has improved, meaning LEDs are impacting many layers in the production process.

"Quicker rooting time, reductions in PGR usage, crop readiness and vigor are just a few of the benefits we are observing," he says. In terms of payback, Tom expects electrical saving alone to achieve break-even in 5.9 years.



## Trucking

Jason Parks at Parks Brothers Farm in Van Buren, Arkansas, feels investing in smaller trucks has greatly benefitted the greenhouse recently.

“We bought two International box trucks early this year that are smaller than our other Peterbilt bob-tail trucks. Due to their size, they do not require a CDL to operate. We are still renting similar trucks from Ryder, just not as many,” he says. “We aren’t saving much money until they are paid for, but

at least the money is going towards an asset instead of into the black hole of expenses.”

With smaller trucks, Jason feels it’s easier to find drivers. Parks Brothers has several employees who drive during shipping season and then work in the greenhouses in the off season.



## Automation upgrades

At Armstrong Growers in Glendora, California, VP and GM James Russell feels a new transplanter is really paying off for the operation.

“We upgraded one of our transplanters last year to a Pack Planter from TTA. This machine was 25% faster than our older machine and allowed us to finish a normal planting week one day sooner,” he explains. “The machine is also more flexible in accepting plug trays from multiple

sources.”

Often with automation improvements, the payback can be seen on a daily basis—especially during peak season.

## What else?

Some other great investments called out by the growers we talked to include:

- Upgrading pumps to use pond water instead of city water (Parks Brothers)
- Partnering with a software company to implement an online ordering system—Armstrong Growers said it’s already paying back, allowing customers to place mobile orders.
- Investments in people almost always pay great dividends—Tom at Van Wingerden Greenhouses asked his team to weigh in on the question and they all agreed that good people are always the best investments.

“Surrounding ourselves with a group of people with diverse skill sets and similar values to ours has helped us work and grow in a happy and successful environment,” he said. **GT**