

GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

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When the Robots Come for Us

Jennifer Zurko



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As a society, we like being scared. We flock to haunted houses during the fall and watch horror movies to get that adrenaline rush from being spooked out of our skin.

I, for one, do not care for horror movies. I'm the type who has days of nightmares after watching something scary. Even now at the ripe, old age of [REDACTED], it's a guarantee that I will be thinking about the rubberman from "American Horror Story" and the Whitewalkers from "Game of Thrones" for nights on end. I still have trauma from watching Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video in first grade.

So I'd rather not.

I get that scary is a draw for a lot of people. There are still tons of shows about zombie apocalypses and fungal strains that turn us all into blood-thirsty monsters. But you know what I think is kinda scary right now? Artificial intelligence.

I'm all for technological advancements. I'm the first to update my iPhone, want the newest MacBook and stream the latest show. Ordering kiosks at McDonald's don't wig me out. I embrace QR codes. I am one with the cloud.

What I'm saying is AI can encompass many things that include a lot of cool, new technology that makes my life easier and go faster. But there are new types of AI freaking me out.

Lately, we here at Ball Publishing have been "playing" with ChatGPT, the writing app that you've probably seen all over the news. Bossman Beytes asked it to write about barbecue in the style of P.G. Wodehouse. The result was uncanny. Then he asked it to write an essay about him, Chris Beytes—horticulture journalist, grilling aficionado and long-drum-solo enthusiast. It was able to pick up on actual words and phrases direct from Chris just by reaching its techie tentacles out into the web.

When he asked ChatGPT to write a limerick about me, Jen Zurko—horticulture journalist, long-suffering Chicago sports supporter and hip-hop connoisseur—this is what it spit out:

There once was a writer named Jen,

Whose love for flowers knew no end,

*But when the Bears played,
She'd put down her quill and not be swayed,
For football was her passion, amen!*

For a second, I thought ChatGPT was that weirdo who stalked me in college while I was writing for the student newspaper.

Chris put it best: “The negative ramifications of how easy this is to do are mind-boggling.”

Indeed.

I found messing with ChatGPT to be hilarious, but also crazy and scary and a little icky. The fact that a software program can produce something so close to what we could have done manually is a bit unsettling.

But, at the same time, we have to acknowledge that AI is here and should not be ignored. We just don't know how much of a role it'll play in our lives and if it'll have a more positive or negative impact.

We're already experiencing many forms of AI in the greenhouse. Over the years, we've seen irrigation, ventilation and heating/cooling become much more automated. But just over the last three to five years, we've seen an absolute explosion of new technology that will forever change the way we control the environment that grows plants. I spoke to a few structures experts to get their take on the new technology that we're seeing in the greenhouse, and I'm telling you, it's amazing how quickly things are changing. All of them put together have decades and decades of experience, and even they're surprised by the rapid progression.

Some of it is a blessing and will solve many pain points; some should be treated with some skepticism. Regardless, AI is happening. And as Art Parkerson so eloquently put it in his column, “You'd have to be an idiot to bet against AI ...”

At first I was a little nervous that I could be replaced by a writing app. But the more I read about it—and the more I see its final product—the more my feelings are assuaged that at least this robot won't be coming for me anytime soon.

Besides, no robot could replace my witty discourses on the industry and life in general that you read on this page every month ... at least that's what I keep telling myself. **GT**

(Actually written by Jen Zurko. Not a robot.)