

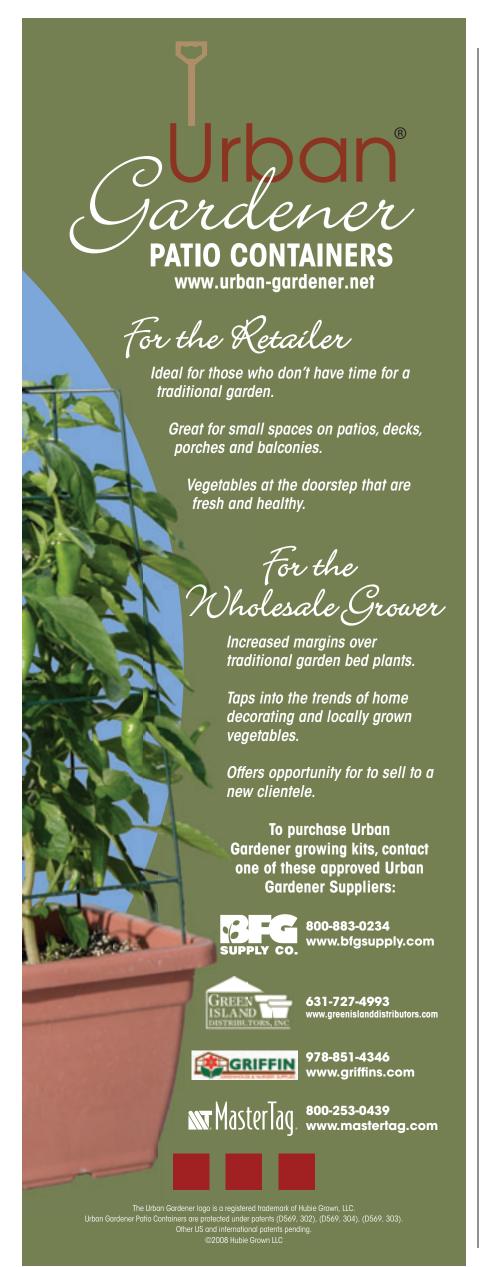
ments they will need and work out any compatibility problems among different companies' machines.

For example, when we were in negotiations with one company, we ended up having a three-way meeting with the owner of the greenhouse and another machinery manufacturer.



This trayfiller is easy to adjust and flexible to different tray sizes. Its best element is its quality of filling.





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automation

During our meeting, we found three points where the overall layout needed to be changed. Without that meeting, we would have had to adjust the layout after delivery, which would have cost more for both the supplier and customer. Moreover, it would have meant unnecessary aggravation during setup where the key focus needs to be training of the operators of the new equipment.

Preparing for Use

Training is also an important part of the equipment installation; in general, the more automated the equipment, the greater the need for training. If you have invested thousands of dollars in equipment but don't receive adequate training, you run the risk of inefficiency or not using the equipment to its full extent.

Ellepot USA's standardized training program trains employees not only to use the equipment but also to troubleshoot it. In some cases, this means that customers receive more training than they think they need, but our philosophy is too much training is better than not enough. When greenhouses or nurseries purchase large equipment, we invite the customer to Denmark to train during a test run of their machinery. This gives customers an opportunity to train twice before they fly solo.

We put that effort into training because we want our customers to receive the best possible experience after our technicians are gone. Let's face it: When you buy machinery, you will have issues from time to time. The better your employees are at troubleshooting and fixing equipment themselves, the more hours the equipment will run and the lower your production costs.

The Continental Divide

Automation is often connected with European production, in part because of the high cost of labor and other input costs in Europe. So, will North American growers automate as much as European growers? It is likely that some specialist growers will be as automated as their colleagues in North Europe — some already are. However, most growers in North America produce a much larger product line then their European counterparts, which means the occurrence of automation is lower.

In the end, the greenhouse and

ADDED BENEFITS OF AUTOMATION

In the coming years, there will be two big reasons to make an increased investment in machinery: energy and labor.

Energy. There's already a big move toward greater energy efficiency. In the past few years, many of our customers have invested in biomass boilers and are starting to look at the viability of wind and solar energy. Remember that energy is not only what you pay for heating the greenhouse but also the expense of shipping the product. For example, one grower who we work with calculated that he is saving approximately \$32,000 per year — just in freight cost savings! — by making his stabilized media rather than purchasing prefilled trays.

Some customers are also seeing the benefits of producing liners that are larger than the traditional 84- or 105-tray size in order to reduce finish times on baskets and combination pots. In some cases we see large, prefinished plugs produced in Florida in January and shipped to Northern growers, saving heat costs in the coldest part of the year.

Labor. With more and more green-houses looking to lean production, many will focus on the labor savings of automation. A few reasons automation can help trim down labor costs: During manual production, labor costs will not stay constant — they will increase at about the same rate as inflation. It's hard to find the right labor, and even then it's tough to achieve consistency, and there's a lot of turnover.

nursery industry will continue to automate because they must increase productivity and decrease costs. The "big players" in the marketplace are automating, spending money to make money. However, this does not mean that there will be no room for the smaller growers. In fact, many smaller growers are taking advantage of automation. For example, small growers that are using prefinished or plug-andship material are taking advantage of larger growers' investments. You could also see a situation where some smaller growers are servicing larger growers with material that is hard to automate: buying-in prefinished plant material from a large, fully automated grower, finishing the product and selling it back to the same large grower.

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automation

To Automate or **Not to Automate?**

When consulting with greenhouse operations, the most common argument I hear against automation is "I'm a grower, not a manager,"

meaning their job is to grow plants, not manage people or production. But in my opinion, when you grow plants, you manage their production, which makes you both a grower and a manager at the same time.

many things, but it will not do everything. When deciding how to automate your greenhouse or nursery, decide early in the pro-

In the end, automation can do cess exactly what you will be



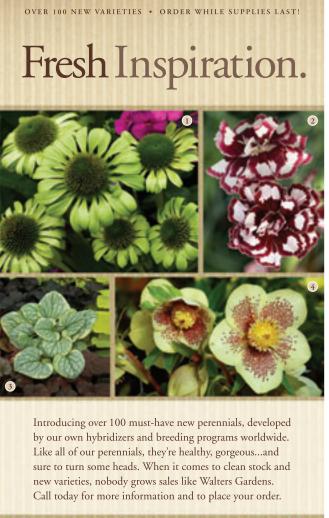
Top: Transplanters are getting more flexible to work with. Bottom: You can reduce freight costs up to 50 percent by using a bale breaker.

expecting from the equipment and carefully plan on how that equipment will fit into your operation. You always need to consider that by automating, you may gain speed and reduce labor, but you may also lose some flexibility. Before you purchase a large, sophisticated piece of equipment, make sure to look at streamlining your inputs.

Once the equipment has arrived, thoroughly train your staff not only to run the equipment, but also on how to troubleshoot problems that arise during production. Then set goals for the equipment and continually evaluate whether those goals are being met. GPN

Lars Jensen is national sales manager for Ellepot USA. He can be reached at lpj@ellepot.dk.

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