

# TACKLING AUTOMATION AND CONSUMER TRENDS

*Greenhouse Growers EXPO sessions to offer tips on best economical practices, how to combat supply chain shortages, houseplant trends and more.*

**BY MADI JONES**

**W**ith the ever-changing market, growers must keep up with the best economical practices, learn how to combat supply chain shortages and more. During the 2022 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO and the concurrent Michigan Greenhouse Growers EXPO, growers have the opportunity to learn about these issues through four different sessions.

Paul Fisher, professor and floriculture Extension specialist, has over 30 years of experience in applied research and farm advising for the commercial greenhouse and controlled environment industry.

Fisher's session at the EXPO is titled "By Hand or Machine? Deciding on Automation."

"I will specifically focus on transplanting of cuttings, one of the most labor-intensive tasks in young plant products," Fisher says. "I will also discuss how to track manual labor, figure out costs as a baseline, benchmark internally and with other growers, and compare that with automated transplanter options."

As growers are looking at integrating more automation to their operations, labor, supply chain issues and inflation are critical factors that affect profitability, according to Fisher.

A few "truths" he notes about automation in horticulture and agriculture include:

- Automation is just one option to improve labor efficiency; look first at optimizing your workforce with lean practices.
- It takes time for robotics to start to really be efficient.



Paul Fisher

- The economics of return on investment are not just about payback time. Consider other factors such as increasing your capacity at the peak and making the work environment safer and more professional for staff.

There isn't one right or wrong plan for growers. According to Fisher, every grower needs a customized analysis to fit their needs and production efforts. Fisher advises growers to research best practices that will fit their production plan when looking to add automation.

"Do your homework. Visit other growers and let others work out the kinks. Avoid being too far out on the bleeding edge," he says. "Concentrate on efficiency and quality, not just low-cost production."

## CONSUMERS AND THEIR LOVE AFFAIR WITH HOUSEPLANTS

Melinda Knuth, assistant professor of horticultural marketing at North Carolina State University, will also speak at the Greenhouse Growers EXPO this year. Knuth

has experience in researching the interface between people and plants and helping the horticulture industry understand consumer preferences, perceptions and motivations. In her session, "Consumers and Their Love Affair with Houseplants," Knuth will speak on the "houseplant craze" and how growers can capitalize on it.

Since 2015, Knuth has seen an increase in houseplant sales; however, COVID-19

accelerated the houseplant industry even more.

"The houseplant popularity is here to stay for the next five years, at least," she says. "Because of the demographic makeup of younger consumers, they will be continuing to buy houseplants to beautify and fill their apartments and spaces. They also are opting to care for plants and pets instead of having children."

According to Knuth, millennials are not the only people buying houseplants: "We're seeing an expansion in who is buying houseplants. Not just millennials are buying houseplants anymore, but we have evidence to show that the breadth of consumers who are buying is increasing as well as the depth of consumption."

The most popular plants on the market are flowering houseplants and ferns. Surprisingly, succulents are reported to be not as popular as they were in the past. Knuth says plants that are more niche and unique are often more desired by consumers.

Knuth will be giving another session about social media engagement, which will highlight horticulture consumer social media habits and ways to engage as retailers and growers.

Other sessions featured during the EXPO include "Post-Pandemic Retail Strategies" by Bridget Behe and "Stretching Peat to Combat Supply Shortages" by Garrett Owen.

Learn more about these sessions and others at [www.glexpo.com](http://www.glexpo.com). The 2022 Great Lakes EXPO and Michigan Greenhouse Growers EXPO will take place Dec. 6-8, at DeVos Place in Grand Rapids, Michigan. [gpn](https://www.gpn.org)

*Madi Jones is custom marketing specialist at Great American Media Services. She can be reached at [mjones@greatamericanpublish.com](mailto:mjones@greatamericanpublish.com).*



Melinda Knuth