

12 Reasons Automation Can Work for Any Greenhouse Grower

By Brian D. Sparks August 15, 2021



The process and scale of greenhouse automation may be different for each grower based on their size, but the reasons for doing so are universal.

“Investing in automation can help you improve plant uniformity and optimize your labor head count, allowing you to streamline workflow in your greenhouse,” said Mike Vallafskey, Vice President of Sales at [AgriNomix](#), who moderated a panel discussion at [Cultivate’21](#) that featured three growers of varying sizes, each of whom has chosen to make automation a key part of their plant production systems.

“There are several myths about automation: you’re too small to get a return on investment; you need to hire engineers to maintain their equipment; or your product line is too diverse,” Vallafskey said. “The reality is that effective automation is possible, as shown by each of these growers.”

Here are 12 insights from the discussion, based on input from each grower on the panel.

- “We’re not looking to save money on labor with automation,” said Davy Wright of [Wright’s Nursery and Greenhouse](#) in Plantersville, AL. “We’re looking to make them more efficient. If we can improve workflow in one area with automation, we can then move our team members to other areas where they are needed more.”

- Another goal Wright said he has is to decrease the amount of time space sits idle in the greenhouse. “If we can use our equipment more effectively, we can get quicker turns on product,” Wright said.
- “I want to have some of the highest paid employees in our area, so we can increase both productivity and employee retention,” said Brian Decker of [Decker’s Nursery](#) in Groveport, OH. “Automation might be my only path to getting there five years from now. Starting down that path is tough, but it’s worth it.”
- “We need to spend more of our time planning,” said Pete DeVry of Canadian-based [DeVry Greenhouses Ltd.](#) “Automation gives us more of those opportunities.
- Decker’s Nursery recently invested in a new container production and pot handling system. “We redesigned our operation around the new machinery, including redoing our floors to accommodate robot plane movers,” Decker said. “This helped us avoid spending a lot more on a heavily customized system, while making us more efficient in the long term.”
- All three growers were asked about the factors they use to evaluate if a new purchase makes sense. “There is some technology that you’ll use know matter what you’re growing,” DeVry said. “That’s where we start.”
- For Decker, the answer to that question is about keeping an eye on the future. “Look at where you think your company needs to be, and what you need to do not just to get there, but to do so while remaining profitable at the same time,” Decker said.
- Time is the most critical factor for Wright. “We have to sell everything we have in a six-week window,” Wright said. “With automation, our size has stayed the same over the last 25 years, but our production has tripled.”
- For automation to work, it’s also important to get buy-in from your team. “I try to document everything we do, so I can show my employees exactly where I’m saving my time and theirs,” DeVry said.
- Decker also said employee input is important. “Ask your employees not just what they think about your workflow processes, but how they can make them better,” Decker said. “Listen to their opinions, acknowledge good ideas, and be willing to make the modifications.”
- “The best way to really think about automation is to consider how it can prepare you for tomorrow,” Wright said. “This makes the initial investment worth the cost almost every time.”
- Decker’s Nursery is an active participant in the LEAP (Labor, Efficiency, Automation, Production) for Sustainability program, which works with growers to better understand how automation can help address labor issues and contribute to

their production capacity and bottom line. Through the program, the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, in partnership with the University of Florida, North Carolina State University, Oregon State University, Texas A&M University, and USDA, and with guidance from an Advisory Board of industry professionals, conduct research about labor challenges and consideration of, and transition to, automation. The Decker's Nursery [website has a series of videos](#) showing how automation has been a key to its success.

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