Automation, Integrations and Follow Ups

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GROWERTALKS MAGAZINE greenPROFIT MAGAZINE

MONDAY, AUGUST 31, 2026

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Ball Culture Guide
THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SEED GERMINATION
By JIM NAU
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ISBN: 978-1-7332541-0-6

Goodness Gardens Robot Success

It's always encouraging to see new commercial technology deliver a genuine success story. Adopting new technology is never without risk, and this one highlights what's becoming an area of increasing value in our industry: automation of NFT systems.

Goodness Gardens, one of the largest basil greenhouses in the country, recently installed a combination of moving gutters from FGM and a dynamic robotic arm from 4XROBOTS. Together, these two systems more than solved a persistent end-of-crop headache for the producer.

Those familiar with NFT systems know the drill: pull the channel, harvest the plants, then deal with the mess; roots, substrate bits, hard water scale and algae coating the inside of the channel. When I describe hydroponics to people outside the industry, this is always the sticking point. There's going to be muck, and that muck needs to be cleaned. Needless to say, it's also a task that workers at Goodness Gardens (and any hydroponic greenhouse) don't exactly look forward to.

The FGM mobile gully system paired with the 4XROBOTS arm has automated that task entirely, and the operational impact has been significant. For one, the robots are faster. Gutter cleaning and prep now moves at twice the previous pace, clearing a meaningful bottleneck in production, a clear win for the bottom line. But automation is often a double-edged sword, and the natural concern is workforce reduction. Goodness Gardens is direct on this point: that has not been the case here.

Repetitive, unpleasant tasks like NFT channel cleaning are notoriously hard to staff. They're never-ending, low-engagement and do little to bring out the best in skilled workers. For the team at Goodness Gardens, offloading this work to automation has been a genuine relief, freeing staff to focus on the tasks they're actually skilled at and where they create the most value for themselves and the company.

This looks like a clear example of ag tech deployed thoughtfully, with benefits for both the workforce and

the balance sheet. Read more about it here.

A side by side comparison of a worker removing plant residue and 4XROBOTS automated robot completing the same task.

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BFG Bankruptcy

The news is official: BFG has filed for bankruptcy. The supplier is working toward liquidation, a company sale or a combination of the two, ending nearly 55 years of business for the horticultural distributor.

The primary driver is a massive debt load owed to horticultural manufacturers. Some of the industry's biggest names appear at the top of the creditor list, including The Scotts Company, Hawthorne Hydroponics, Syngenta Crop Protection and ICL Specialty Fertilizers. BFG owes each of these creditors over a million dollars, and that's not the complete list.

Beyond its commercial distribution operations, BFG also runs Greenhouse Megastore, a retail website serving individual consumers.

The timing is notable. Broader industry indicators are positive, lawn and garden sales have reached an all-time high, yet analyst Daniel Kline argues that increasingly frugal consumer spending habits are driving market share toward big box stores, squeezing niche distributors like BFG with thinner margins and a tougher business climate.

Click here for more about the bankruptcy and analysis.

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Little Leaf Loyalty

In a counterpoint to BFG's struggles, Little Leaf Farms is demonstrating that consumers are willing to value the source of their food, and not simply reach for the lowest price on the shelf.

Following the cyclospora outbreak, lettuce sales plunged across the United States. I was certainly part of that trend—I remember distinctly seeing some questionable lettuce at a local food retailer during Cultivate'26 and thinking, hard pass. For Little Leaf Farms, that drop in demand was felt, but short-lived. In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak, the greenhouse lettuce company reported surging sales as their marketing team moved quickly to differentiate their product as a safe, protected offering of known origin.

The question remained: would this be a blip driven by the latest headlines, or could the sales boost translate into long-term customer loyalty?

For now, it appears the answer is yes to the latter. Little Leaf now supplies 6% of the packaged salad category nationwide, a 50% increase over last year. The company has also just launched "Love Letters," a sweepstakes giving 200 customers the chance to win free lettuce for a year by submitting a one-sentence love letter. Entries are open through September 30th.

It's tempting to say Little Leaf simply took advantage of the oft-maligned advice to "never let a crisis go to waste." But I think Trailer Park Boys' Ricky put it better: atodaso. Those of us in CEA have long championed the safety, reliability and traceability of greenhouse-grown produce when it comes to food safety. The cyclospora outbreak was unfortunate, but consumers coming around to valuing safe, traceable agricultural production? That's a silver lining worth taking.

Find more about it here.

Introducing the United Greenhouse Growers Association

By Jen P.

I was recently on a video call introducing horticulture industry members to a growing organization worth knowing about: the United Greenhouse Growers Association (UGGA), a nonprofit that's free for anyone in the industry to join. UGGA was built to connect growers, vendors, researchers and customers so the industry as a whole can succeed.

UGGA has built support from consultants, university researchers and educators across the protected-culture spectrum, from high tunnels to advanced CEA facilities. The organization was co-founded about a year ago by Dr. Melanie Yelton (who has held a variety of positions in horticultural lighting, growing, and consulting) and Sam Chronert (an agronomist with expertise in indoor produce production), and is supported by a scientific advisory board, which includes Chieri Kubota, John Ertle, Nadia Sabeh and Noah Langenfeld.

The organization has several goals:

- Offer a place for community and networking among growers and industry representatives.
- Serve as a clearinghouse of proven resources covering all aspects of greenhouse horticulture, including floriculture and produce production.
- Create practical guides, both for those entering the industry and for growers looking to strategically improve their facilities.
- Build shared standards for greenhouse building and production, creating a common language across the industry.

Much of this work happens through member-led working groups, including a Forum group with a space

for members to connect and trade knowledge, and a Stories group collecting and sharing grower experiences from across the industry. UGGA is actively calling for members to get involved in shaping this organization and building a community.

One area getting particular attention right now is the Find-a-Grower tool, a directory meant to help growers, vendors and customers find and connect with each other. UGGA wants your help strengthening it, whether that means adding your own listing or pointing them toward others who should be included.

If you're in the industry, whether you're a grower or a vendor, you can join UGGA for free and suggest a listing for the Resources tab through their Contact page.

The United Greenhouse Growers Association's New Logo

USDA Funds GLASE

The Greenhouse Lighting and Systems Engineering (GLASE) consortium has announced $300,000 in additional funding, secured in collaboration with Hoogendoorn Growth Management.

Founded nearly a decade ago, GLASE is a collaboration between Cornell University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, with additional buy-in from industry partners. The consortium brings together private and public partners with the explicit goal of advancing commercial innovation and academic research to accelerate the adoption of new technologies.

For this USDA-funded project, GLASE has proposed the development of a greenhouse simulation training platform, named CROP-SIM, designed to educate students and industry workers on climate control strategies. The platform will allow users to work through scenarios in which crop loss from environmental mismanagement can be identified and mitigated.

This one hits close to home. A few years back, I was passed over for a position due to a lack of hands-on experience with greenhouse control technology. The real frustration wasn't the rejection, it was not knowing how to get that experience in the first place. Universities rarely cover this material, and the

most reliable path has historically been on-the-job training. In an era of increasing AI and technology integration, greenhouse control systems represent one of the clearest gaps between formal education and commercial practice, and one of the biggest opportunities to close it.

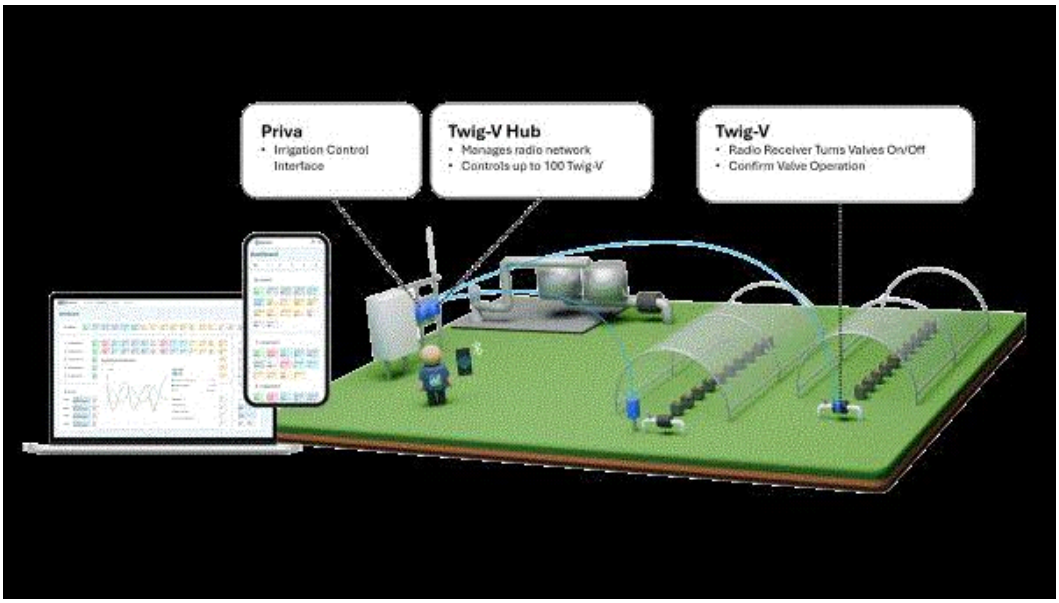
CROP-SIM will initially focus on teen-leaf lettuce production and is slated for development over the next two years. Check out GLASE and the press release here.

Priva and Nelson Irrigation Integrate Systems

Greenhouse controller company Priva and Nelson Irrigation have announced a partnership, integrating their platforms so growers can now manage Nelson products directly through Priva.

The partnership bridges an interesting divide in the CEA industry, where many operations blend indoor and outdoor production. For pure greenhouse growers, Priva's irrigation controls are likely already familiar. They work well inside the greenhouse, where the climate is controlled and predictable, and 120V power is readily accessible.

The challenge comes for growers who also manage high tunnels, fields or other outdoor production areas. In those environments, monitoring soil moisture, connecting irrigation solenoids and ensuring adequate coverage becomes considerably more complicated. That's where Nelson comes in.



An outline from Priva displaying the network architecture from field hoophouses to your phone or computer.

Nelson's products run on solar panels and batteries and communicate via radio, meaning installation requires no wiring for power or communication. (I've struggled to find an outlet outdoors myself, and I can confirm that jamming a plug into a potato does not provide meaningful power.) The radio communication allows Nelson's Twig-V Hub to co-locate with the Priva panel, sharing the only wired connection at that single, accessible point.

From there, all of Nelson's outdoor irrigation functionality can be managed within the Priva system. For growers running mixed production environments, this integration could meaningfully consolidate operations, and yes, one fewer app to juggle.

Dr. Jake Holley
Editor-at-Large
Inside Grower

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