

Guest Column

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Why You Need AI, No Matter Your Size

Clint Albin



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For decades, I've had the unique privilege of a front-row seat to the evolving landscape of the green industry. From navigating the bustling aisles of the Management Clinic in Louisville, Kentucky, to hosting those legendary bus tours that uncovered the next big thing, my career has been defined by identifying pathways to growth and prosperity.

I've worked hand-in-hand providing strategic positioning to the country's top retailers, and for the past five years, I've had the honor of facilitating one of the most well-attended panel series at Cultivate: "Visioning to 2025," along with my friend Sam Kirkland of Epicor. Now, as we stand on the precipice of an even greater transformation, I'm here to tell you that the next BIG thing isn't just on the horizon, it's

already here, and it's empowering business to do more and earn more with less friction and fewer constraints: Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The very notion of AI can sound daunting, conjuring images of complex algorithms and futuristic robotics. For many small- to medium-sized businesses in our green industry, the thought of implementing such advanced technology might feel out of reach, something reserved for Silicon Valley giants. Let me say this clearly: That perception is not only wrong, it's actively holding you back. AI, at its core, is a practical tool designed to enhance efficiency and unlock new opportunities, and its accessible applications are already making the everyday world better for businesses just like yours.

We're entering an era where AI has the ability to give its users the "essence of abundance," in the words of Garry Tan, a managing partner at Y Combinator. What does that mean for you, as a dedicated grower, innovative landscaper or passionate garden center retailer? It translates into a profound choice: more time and/or more money. And in our industry, where razor-thin margins and demanding seasons are the norm, both are invaluable commodities.

Consider the practical implications. When I facilitated the "Visioning to 2025" panels, we often discussed future trends, consumer shifts and operational efficiencies. We grappled with challenges like labor shortages, optimizing inventory and truly understanding customer preferences. AI offers tangible solutions to these critical problems, not as obscure promises, but real answers right now.

Think about your daily operations. How much time is spent on repetitive tasks? How many opportunities are missed due to a lack of data analysis or an inability to predict market shifts? This is where AI steps in. It's not about replacing human ingenuity; it's about augmenting it. It's about leveraging smart tools to free up your most fundamental resources—your people and your capital—so they can focus on what they do best: growing beautiful plants, creating stunning landscapes and cultivating loyal customers.

Concrete Ways to Implement AI

Let's break down some foundational areas where AI is already making a tangible difference, even for businesses without a dedicated tech department.

For Retailers: Imagine an AI-powered system analyzing your sales data—not just telling you what sold yesterday, but predicting what will sell next season with remarkable accuracy, accounting for weather patterns, local events and even social media trends. This moves beyond basic inventory management into proactive, profit-maximizing decisions. Picture a chatbot on your website answering common customer questions 24/7, freeing up your team to provide in-person, high-touch service. This isn't science fiction; it's an immediate opportunity for improved customer experience and reduced overhead. My experience in providing strategic positioning to America's top retailers has shown me time and again that understanding consumer behavior is paramount. AI offers an unparalleled lens into that behavior.

For Growers: From optimizing irrigation schedules based on real-time climate data and plant needs to detecting early signs of disease or pests through image recognition, AI offers precision agriculture a profound leap forward. It means less waste, healthier crops and, ultimately, more yield. But AI for growers extends far beyond just basic order-taking. We're talking about assortment maximization, where AI analyzes market demand, growing cycles and even competitor offerings to design your daily sales mix with the highest trajectory for profit. It's about moving from simply fulfilling demand to actively shaping and driving it, ensuring every square foot of your growing operation is producing precisely what the market needs, when it needs it and at the optimal price point. This directly translates to more money in your pocket and more time to focus on cultivation innovation and expansion, rather than reacting to market whims.

For Landscapers: AI can revolutionize project bidding by quickly analyzing property data, optimizing material usage and even visualizing designs for clients in real time. Routing software powered by AI can create the most efficient daily schedules for your crews, minimizing travel time and fuel costs. Crucially, AI also enhances employee management significantly. Imagine a system where your team members use their smartphones to check into job sites at the start of their day, with GPS confirmation ensuring they're at the correct location and ready to work. This automates time tracking, provides real-time visibility into crew deployment and enhances accountability, freeing up supervisors from administrative burdens and allowing them to focus on quality control and client satisfaction.

The challenge for our industry isn't whether AI is coming; it's whether we're ready to embrace its practical applications. My past experience hosting bus tours to find the next BIG thing wasn't about simply observing; it was about identifying actionable insights for forward-thinking businesses. My time in charge of the Management Clinic reinforced the importance of equipping our leaders with cutting-edge knowledge. And the "Visioning to 2025" series at Cultivate has always been about preparing for the future, not just reacting to it.

This is why I, alongside industry stalwarts Bill Calkins and Jennifer Polanz, are launching a multi-part, multimedia series to guide you through this transformative journey. Through print articles and in-depth podcasts, we will

demystify AI, break down complex concepts into strategies you can act on and showcase real-world examples from retailers, landscapers and growers who are already leveraging this powerful technology.

We'll feature guests from different segments of our industry who are on the front lines and making AI work for them. Our goal isn't just to inform you, but to empower you. To provide you with the necessary understanding and practical steps to integrate AI into your everyday business, allowing you to gain that essence of abundance—whether it's more time to innovate, more time with your family or more money to reinvest in your passion.

The future of the green industry is here and it's intelligent. Join us as we explore how AI can cultivate unprecedented growth for your business. The journey to abundance begins now. **GP**

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