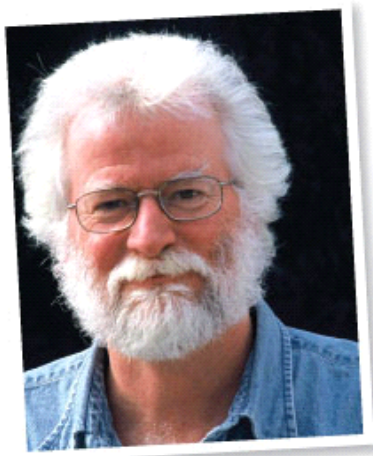


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Boomer? OK

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Despite what younger, tech-savvy relatives believe, Boomer is not synonymous with Luddite.

As stated before in *This Space*, I'm all for appropriate technology. Depending on your size and philosophy, "appropriate" ranges from near-zero tech on up to robots, Artificial Intelligence and computerized everything. As the industry gravitates toward the latter model, amazing things happen.

Holland's Autonomous Greenhouse Challenge 2020 pitted five remote teams against one another and actual hands-on humans. Each had 1,000 square feet of identical mechanized, Internet-connected cherry tomato greenhouse. Team Automatoes, composed of "consultants, data scientists, engineers, researchers, students" and three tech firms, never entering the growing area, swept three categories: "Net result (i.e., quality and quantity harvested),

sustainability and AI strategy."

Remarkable, but a very small test, and ... "sustainable?" Not really, not yet. But given today's labor situation, even absent a pandemic, greenhouses sans people make an eerie sort of sense.

My favorite new tech? My robot vacuum cleaner, a gift from one of the aforementioned relatives. I named it J. Edgar, as in Hoover, as in vacuums and investigations. Like his namesakes, he loves gathering dirt.

J. Edgar is relatively unsophisticated. His wireless remote sends signals directly from my hand to his dirty little mind. Pricier models are smartphone-controlled, which epitomizes Technology Because We Can—my least favorite kind.

Running such gadgets means sending commands via wifi, fiber-optic cable, towers and satellites to The Cloud, a.k.a. megacomputer banks somewhere: the Carolinas, Salt Lake City, maybe Jakarta. After consulting the right hardware, your data retrace that maze, reenter your home and instruct your vacuum.

It happens amazingly fast, except when it doesn't. It's jaw-droppingly impressive and seriously stupid. A Yiddish expression applies here: "Too smart is dumb."

True, those vacs can be operated from anywhere in the world. Cool! But how often does that happen? Usually, you and your machine are in the same room. Lift your feet. Involving the Internet is like circumnavigating the globe to kiss someone standing right behind you, so nobody has to turn around.

J. Edgar can clean while I'm away. A timer activates him at a preset hour, like a coffeemaker. But I'd rather be around when he's working. He's fun to watch, and occasionally he gets wrapped up in his work and requires rescuing.

I hear you: An email to someone across the office traces an equally convoluted path. You could just say, "Hey!" Fair enough. But email is often better than a conversation. Robovacs? Sorry, not seeing the advantage.

J. Edgar is a tiny example. There's pushback against devices that require Internet intervention, or that only the manufacturer can mend or amend. Fed up with uber-tech machinery they can't fix themselves, Midwest farmers are spurning new machines and buying 40-year-old tractors. It's annoying when your car throws error codes only the dealer can crack, but imagine your \$250,000 combine idled midfield, mid-harvest and only the pros from Dover (if you named that movie without googling, you're a fellow Boomer) can revive it.

Luckily, analog still works. Remember books? The right book is faster than a browser, works anywhere, never crashes or freezes, and won't suck you into the Pinterest swamp. A "right book" recently hit the market.

Old friend and industry hero Allan M. Armitage, UGA Professor Emeritus, has released the fourth edition of his trademark tome, "Herbaceous Perennial Plants." What sets this book apart is its readability. Technical enough for the classroom (I had to look up "sessile follicle"), HPP4 can actually be read for enjoyment. That's a rare balance.

OK, so this Boomer has a few Luddite tendencies. So be it. Don't tell the kids. **GP**

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