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## Plug planter reduces tomato labour, covers more acres

The technology is being introduced to Ontario fields this spring



**BY JEFFREY CARTER**  
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Ontario's vegetable industry is poised to take a large step forward with the introduction of a new automated planting system developed in Belgium. It's three times faster compared than the plug transplanting systems currently being used in the province, according to Pascal Jennen.

Jennen and his brother Kevin are part of a group of Southwestern Ontario farmers importing the technology to Canada for this year's spring planting. They spoke at tomato day at Oungah in Chatham-Kent on March 7.

"This is not a big corporation we're dealing with. This is just a guy who had a dream," Pascal said.

With their old system, it took the Jennens at least 20 planting days for their onion crop alone – about 18 million plug plants. Their crew of 30 people in the field work about 14 hours a day to get the job done.

"We've been doing onions. We've worked day and night planting for years."

They expect their six-robot Agriplanter to speed up the



This photograph illustrates the current approach to transplanting vegetable plug plants in Ontario fields. That may be about to change with the introduction of technology from Belgium. The Agriplanter system can put plugs into the ground three times as fast with less than half the labour.

process and, just as important, dramatically reduce the amount of labour required. Their 15-foot planting unit has six robots each capable of planting 275 plugs per minute. Based on a 12,000 plant-population and 45 minutes of actual planting time per hour, that works out to about six acres per hour.

The Jennens figure three workers and a driver will be needed to put a six-robot unit to work this spring at their farm-

ing operation in the Dresden area where they also produce their own onion plugs.

In total, three Agriplanters are to be working in Southwestern fields this summer. The Jennen's machine with its six robots is the largest.

"This is the first one they made this big."

The technology is proven, having been employed in Europe for 10 years.

Unfortunately, there was a significant hitch as plans to

bring the technology to Ontario were laid. The Ontario group was told by the technology's developer, Bart Parrien, that the single-use trays commonly used to grow vegetable plugs in Ontario were too flimsy to work in his machines.

The Jennen brothers and other members of their group were not quite so sure and last April traveled to Europe to investigate further.

It was after consuming some wine at a bistro in Bolo-

gna, Italy that they came up with a solution and a name for their group – Otelo. Otelo is the type of red wine they were drinking.

The design for an aluminum sleeve into which trays could be inserted for added strength was sketched out on a paper napkin and, by the following morning, downloaded to a CAD (computer-aided design) file thanks to Chris Denys. Jennen said

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Kevin and Pascal Jennen talked about new planting technology from Belgium that's being introduced to Ontario's vegetable industry at Tomato Day in Chatham-Kent on March 7. The aluminum tray Pascal is holding was developed so that the system could be adapted to the plastic tray types used by the industry in North America.

## 300-bushel corn strategies

How do they do it? If you've ever wondered how some growers accomplish those 300-plus bushel corn yields, the folks at Corteva Agrisciences have a few suggestions.

They've compiled information from over 500 entries received between 2013 and 2018 in the annual National Corn Growers Association high yield contest looking at what some of these top producers have in common.

Some of the findings were to be expected: selecting a

top-yielding hybrid, early planting, and selecting a seeding rate of somewhere between 32,000 and 42,000.

Rotating corn was other crops generally resulted in higher yield but the findings show that even continuous corn can produce top yields.

There was nothing surprising in the area of row width as most of the top entries were in 30-inch rows.

A 300-bushel corn crop requires about 336 lbs of N but only a portion of that needs to be provided in the

form of fertilizer, the report states. Application rates varied greatly between the entrants but most applied somewhere between 200 and 300 lbs of N.

Over 80 per cent of the entries did some in-crop application of nitrogen.

About half of the growers added some micronutrients to their fertility program. Sulphur and zinc were the most common micros followed by boron. Around five per cent of the entrants also added magnesium or manganese.

## Alberta has fourth PED case

Alberta has had its fourth outbreak of Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea virus, but the provincial agriculture department and

the Alberta pork board won't say who or where.

The three previous cases were all in Southern Alberta.

Any producers within 60 kilometres "will be notified separately and provided additional biosecurity instruction," the Alberta Pork marketing board said.

Ontario has had 124 outbreaks.

## Planter

• Continued from page 1

Denys recently came back to work with his family after being employed as an engineer with Toyota.

The Agriplanter system works with a range of plug-plant heights and places the plugs with good soil-to-root contact, Jennen said. There's an electronic eye to detect any misses and a Raven controller to manage the delivery of water and fertilizer to the plugs.

Working closely with the tray manufacturer, Blackmore Company in Michigan, the holes in the trays to be used with the technology are now precisely centered. Jennen also acknowledges support provided by government, the Ontario Social and Crop Improvement Association, the Ontario Tomato Seedling Growers and others from among grower community.

"We're all individuals here but as a group we're a lot stronger," he said.

The Ontario Tomato Seeding Growers contributed enough plug plants of various plant types to test the technology last October. About five acres were planted and there were few hiccups.

The Otello Group is composed of seven families, Pascal and Dana Jennen, Kevin and Kim Jennen, Rob and Erin Denys, Greg and Jodi Bogaert, Peter and Deb Bogaert, Chris and Kari Denys, and Ed and Betty Denys.

There's likely to be a demonstration this summer.

To view the technology in action now, visit the Agriplanter website.





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