

Leave the plant lifting to Billerica co.'s robot

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Veterans of the companies that developed the Segway and the Roomba have launched a new venture called Harvest Automation to develop and sell a robot for agricultural and nursery use.

“We are a robotics company that has its heritage from two other robotics companies,” said Wade Appelman, the company’s marketing vice president.



SEED MONEY: Ben Flaumenhaft highlighting of Billerica-based Harvest Automation, adjusts a robot that can move potted plants.

Until recently, the start-up worked out of founder and chief executive officer Charles Grinnell’s home in Groton. Grinnell spent years at DEKA Research and Development Corp., the New Hampshire firm best known for its invention of the Segway Personal Transporter. Joseph Jones, Harvest’s chief technology officer, was employed at iRobot, where he was part of the team that devised the Roomba, the floor-cleaning device.

Harvest currently employs 15 engineers at its newly opened 6,000-square-foot headquarters in Billerica. It expects 10 more employees to be hired by the year’s end, according to Appelman.

The company began in 2008 with an eye to developing a \$15,000 robot that could be used in a warehouse setting to replace manual tasks that Appelman called “dull, dirty and dangerous.” They also examined agricultural settings such as giant nurseries and greenhouses where wholesale growers plant flowers on hundreds of acres that are transported by hand in containers.

“Our robots can move these heavy containers one at a time but with great speed,” Appelman said. “We are in prototype development now, but will be in the market in 2011.”

Earlier this year, Harvest Automation secured \$4 million in funding from the Massachusetts Technology Development Corp., Life Science Partners and MidPoint Food & Ag Fund.

Derek Morikawa, chief executive of Vision Robotics Corp., a competing California-based company that is developing a prototype for orange harvesting and apple picking, said for years much of the work in the fields was done by laborers when workers were plentiful and labor costs were cheap. “Today, labor is becoming scarce and expensive and that has created demand for companies to provide robotic technology help,” he said.

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