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# Potting for Profit: Can One Machine Fuel a Nursery's Growth?

**Margarita Velandia,** Professor, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture
**Bill Jones,** Founder and President, Carolina Native Nursery
**Anthony LeBude,** Associate Professor, Department of Horticultural Science, North Carolina State University
**Alicia Rihn,** Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture
**Le Chen,** Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture
**Luis Ribera,** Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, Texas A&M University

## 1. Preface

This publication explains the economics of adopting a potting machine as part of an effort to expand nursery production to meet increasing demand. Specifically, we describe the investment costs associated with expanding production, which include land, a potting machine, a building and other infrastructure to accommodate the machine and the economic implications of this investment for a medium-scale container nursery. Nursery size can be described by annual gross sales. Fulcher et al. (2023) reported a median annual sales level of $1.4 million among respondents to a U.S. nurseries survey conducted in 2021. Using this median as a reference point, we define nurseries with annual gross sales of $1 million to $2 million as medium-sized nurseries in this publication.

The information presented here is not intended to be a definitive guide to production practices or technology adoption, but it provides guidance on estimating the physical and financial requirements of comparable nurseries in similar contexts. Specific assumptions were adopted for this study based on a specific nursery case study, but these assumptions may not fit every situation since production costs and revenue vary across nurseries depending on the following factors:

- Capital
- Labor
- Size of the operation
- Type of plants grown
- Cultural practices
- Input prices
- Sale prices

To avoid unwarranted conclusions for any particular operation, readers must closely examine the assumptions made in this study, including operation size in terms of acres in production, number and size of containers produced per year, number of workers, plant species, and sale prices and then adjust expenses, revenues, or both as appropriate for their operation.

## 2. Potting Machine

A potting machine is a piece of equipment used in commercial nurseries to automate or semi-automate the process of filling containers with substrate, dibbling or drilling for planting, and preparing plants for production. These machines improve consistency, reduce manual labor and increase production capacity (Bartok, 2012). They also standardize potting time, improving the predictability of the number of plants potted. According to a 2021 national survey of U.S. nurseries, 47 percent of respondents reported using potting machines, with greater adoption (79%) among larger (>$1.4M in sales) nurseries relative to smaller nurseries (26%) (Fulcher et al., 2023). Currently, there are various companies selling potting machines to the nursery industry, including AdeptAg[1] , Boulding & Lawson[2] , Javo[3] , Mayer[4] , Pack Manufacturing[5] , Urbinati[6] , StiltPro[7] and TTA-ISO[8] . Although this publication discusses a specific Javo potting machine (Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine), it is important to note that there are other options available. The choice of the potting machine should be based on specific needs related to soil mix/substrate, container size and type, adaptability, desired output, container volume and other factors.

The Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine[9] , purchased by Carolina Native Nursery, located in Burnsville, NC, is an automated container-filling system used in commercial nurseries to streamline and standardize the potting process. It typically handles tasks such as unnesting and feeding containers, filling them with substrate, leveling and conveying them through the production line, significantly reducing manual handling. This machine ensures the substrate is uniformly compressed and that the hole is always dibbled or drilled in the center, improving consistency in container and substrate preparation. The Javo Plus M2.0 can handle container sizes ranging from approximately 4 to 13 inches in diameter. It is ideal for handling different container sizes because the container size can be changed without any tools in a couple of minutes.

In the capital budgeting context of our publication, we focus on the productivity gains from transitioning from manual potting to a Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine. These productivity gains come from eliminating labor constraints in the potting process, allowing more containers to be filled, staged and moved through production per unit of time. In this case study, we focus on the economic benefits captured through higher container output and sales potential, and reduced handling time per container.

## 3. Carolina Native Nursery

Carolina Native Nursery is located in Yancey County, Burnsville, North Carolina. The nursery has been in business for 23 years as of 2026. The operation has 22 total acres and maintains 16 acres in container production. They grow close to 200 species of Eastern U.S. native shrubs, perennials, ferns and grasses. They specialize in native plants and highlight their role in providing food and shelter for a variety of birds, bees and butterflies, using slogans such as “Saving the Earth, One Plant at a Time.” They reported annual sales of over $1 million in 2025. Approximately 80 percent of their sales are products they grow, and the remaining 20 percent are products they buy and resell. The distribution of total sales by type of buyer is 15 percent retail, 35 percent regional landscapers and 20 percent independent garden centers. The remaining 30 percent are sales to buyers outside their primary sales region (Western North Carolina, Eastern Tennessee, Upstate South Carolina), where they sell most of their products. A large percentage of the sales to buyers outside the southern region are to re-wholesalers and are products Carolina Native Nursery buys and resells.

The nursery employs 18 domestic workers: eight full-time, six part-time and four seasonal workers. The nursery does not use the H-2A program. Overall, they have not had challenges attracting and retaining workers, which is largely attributed to paying good salaries to both their seasonal and full-time workers. They pay living wages in Yancey County, North Carolina. According to MIT’s living wage calculator[10] , the hourly wage rate in this county ranges from $20.11 to $51.12 for a full-time worker, depending on the number of working adults in a household with at least one child. Another factor that could explain their success in attracting and retaining quality workers is the benefits they offer. Full-time salaried and hourly workers receive paid leave, a generous health insurance program, and a 401(k) plan. For reference, the 2021 survey of U.S. nurseries conducted by Fulcher et al. (2023) found that only about 29 percent of responding nurseries added employee benefits to address labor shortages. Finally, making workers feel they are part of the business that aims to contribute to environmental sustainability through native plants, sharing customer satisfaction notes with them, and emphasizing their importance to the business’s success may positively impact worker retention (Velandia et al., 2025).

One of the biggest challenges the nursery has faced in the past few years is losses caused by Hurricane Helene. They lost their entire production inventory at the end of 2024. Because their 2024 and 2025 sales are skewed by those losses, we rely on 2023 and 2026 data in the analysis below.

## 4. The Expansion Project

At the end of 2022, Carolina Native Nursery had maxed out its production space and evaluated whether it needed to expand to meet demand. Prior to 2022, demand had been growing at 20 percent annually. To expand their production, they doubled their acreage from 8 to 16 acres. Furthermore, they wanted to increase production without doubling their labor force; therefore, they had to consider mechanization as part of their expansion project. Increasing container production was impossible without a potting machine, unless they more than doubled their labor force. Potting containers manually becomes inefficient once a certain scale is reached.

In this study, we assumed that their container units sold increased by 20 percent in the year of adoption (Year 1) relative to 2023 (Year 0), by 25 percent in the year after adoption (Year 2) and by 30 percent per year thereafter relative to the 2023 baseline. This means that if they sold 100,000 containers in Year 0, they sold 120,000 in Year 1, 125,000 in Year 2 and 130,000 per year thereafter. This assumption is based on the learning curve for workers transitioning from manual potting to machine potting, so we expect their efficiency to increase in Years 2 and 3, enabling them to run the machine at a faster pace. Furthermore, the assumptions above are based on a scenario in which the additional land, number of workers and current setup do not allow them to increase the number of containers sold by more than 30 percent per year relative to the 2023 baseline.

## Decision-Making Process and Investment Costs

Before making the investment decision, the nursery spoke with university faculty in several states and visited nurseries in Tennessee, Ohio and North Carolina to observe other potting machines' performance and ask questions about infrastructure, the personnel required to operate them and potting rates. The time between making a down payment on the equipment and its arrival at the nursery was seven months. The plan they followed was to start purchasing the equipment in early 2023, have it delivered by the end of 2023 and start using it in the spring of 2024. However, as stated above, the nursery's 2024 and 2025 sales were substantially affected by losses caused by Hurricane Helene. Therefore, we use 2023 sales as the pre-expansion baseline (Year 0) and 2026 (Year 1) production, prices, costs and operating information in the capital budgeting analysis presented below. Because azalea production had not yet fully recovered in 2026, additional azalea sales are excluded during the first two years of the capital budget valuation. It is important to note that they had to build a building to house the potting machine before it arrived. They purchased the Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine, a conveyor (Figure 1) and the Javo Easy Topper, a mobile automation unit designed to sit directly over the external take-off conveyor line. The Javo Easy Topper evenly spreads a cover layer—such as bark, mulch, or rice hulls—on top of each container. At Carolina Native Nursery, the Javo Easy Topper spreads rice hulls on the top of the containers, which reduces the need for herbicide applications (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** *Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine and conveyor (image: Margarita Velandia).*



The Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine has an automated container-feeding feature that eliminates the need for a person to place containers on the line, thereby streamlining the process of changing container sizes without tools. It has three stations for workers to pot plants (Figure 3). Workers manually load and unload containers by hand because the building is not set up for large forklifts. The machine they purchased specifically fits the needs of a medium-sized operation. The number of workers involved in the potting process remained the same (eight), while the potting rate (number of containers potted per hour) increased.

**Figure 2.** *Javo Easy Topper that delivers rice to the top of the container, covered by plastic for dust and material containment (picture on the left); Javo Easy Topper spreading rice hulls on top of the container (picture on the right) (image: Margarita Velandia).*



**Figure 3.** *Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine worker stations (image: Anna Senter).*

The total potting machine investment includes the potting machine, conveyor, the automation unit designed to sit directly over the external take-off conveyor line, a building to house the system, grading, gravel, cement and electricity (infrastructure). The total investment costs are estimated at $395,000, with $275,000 associated with the machine, additional components and building investment, and $120,000 for the land. Annual costs associated with the potting machine investment include maintenance and repairs. As Bartok (2012) stated, maintenance costs could be fairly low. Carolina Native Nursery stated that the main maintenance to date is cleaning the potting machine every three weeks. This task is critical because, with such a large investment, they cannot afford downtime. At the end of the season, they remove every panel and set mousetraps within and near the machine, so rodents do not inhabit the machine's housing or chew on wires. In our analysis, we assumed maintenance costs are very low and therefore excluded them from the capital budget valuation calculations described below.

## 5. The Process of Potting Plants Before and After Purchasing the Javo Plus M2.0 Potting Machine

Before adopting the potting machine, Carolina Native Nursery used a large wagon with two potting stations on each side, each with a slot for a container (see Figure 4). A hopper mounted over the wagon was filled with substrate using a Bobcat. Substrate flowed from a void at the bottom of the hopper to the potting stations. Workers filled and planted containers by hand. Then workers picked up the containers, turned around and placed them on a trailer. Another worker came behind and topdressed each container with fertilizer. Once the trailer was full, workers hand-applied rice hulls. Then, workers tagged the plants, moved them to the greenhouse and placed them on the ground by hand. This process required, on average, eight people working simultaneously, including the manager. Three to four workers prepared plants for potting, i.e., removing the container and pruning roots, and four workers potted. The potting rate at the time was 360 plants per hour for #1 containers and 180 plants per hour for #3 containers. Because the manual potting rate does not include watering and setting the plants down, we may be underestimating the labor-productivity gains from adopting the potting machine.



**Figure 4.** *One side of the wagon shows the two potting stations (image: Margarita Velandia).*

Potting rates after adopting a potting machine were 1,500 plants per hour for #1 containers and 900 plants per hour for #3 containers with an average of eight workers. After adopting the machine, the skill level of workers did not change, except for the person running the machine. After adopting the machine, container consistency improved. For example, the automated equipment drills a hole in the substrate at the appropriate depth for the liner. The consistency in the amounts of fertilizer and rice hulls applied and the depth at which the plant is planted has improved. Planting depth is critical when planting new plants. When planting new plants by hand, variation in planting depth among workers can affect plant growth rates and health and thus crop consistency. Therefore, adopting the potting machine reduced the margin of human error in the container assembly line. Plant quality also improved, or, in reality, was normalized, as large numbers of similar plants were potted together in a very short time, rather than spread out over weeks or months. As a result, more plants were similar in size during the marketing window. Because the adoption of the potting machine was part of an expansion project, although efficiency was gained in the potting process, it only increased production; therefore, labor hours were not reallocated to different tasks.

The only challenge with using the potting machine was finding containers made of a material that would work with the automated container-feeding feature. Carolina Native Nursery had to locate an overseas vendor that manufactured high-quality containers compatible with this automated feature. They secured a good price for those containers by purchasing the containers directly from the manufacturer; therefore, that adjustment did not necessarily increase their cost per container.

## 6. Methods, Data and Assumptions used for the Capital Budget Valuation Analysis

We evaluated the economic feasibility of an expansion project that includes increasing container units sold and all associated capital investments, such as a potting machine and attachments, a building and land. We used capital budget valuation to evaluate this expansion project. Capital budget valuation is the process of planning expenditures on long-term assets that generate cash flows over periods longer than one year (Brigham & Houston, 2016). We analyze the capital expenditure on the potting machine and all additional investments associated with its purchase as a capital expenditure project that increases the number of container units sold compared to the 2023 baseline (Brigham & Houston, 2016). We estimated the projected free cash flow (FCF) over the life of the project as:

$$\mathrm{FCF} = [\mathrm{EBIT}(1-\mathrm{T}) + \mathrm{Depreciation}] - [\mathrm{CAPEX} + \Delta\mathrm{Net\ Operating\ Working\ Capital}],$$

where EBIT is defined as earnings before interest and taxes, T is the tax rate, CAPEX is the capital expenditures, and ΔNet Operating Working Capital represents changes in net operating working capital. Net operating working capital is defined as the difference between current assets and current liabilities (Brigham & Houston, 2016). For this expansion project, changes in current assets could include additional potting media/substrates, containers, fertilizer, other supplies inventory, additional finished plants awaiting sale and additional accounts receivable if customers buy on credit. Changes in current liabilities can include accounts payable to suppliers and other short-term operating liabilities. Given that we do not have information to estimate changes in net working capital resulting from the expansion project, we assumed a change in net working capital equal to 10 percent of the increase in annual sales associated with the expansion project. That will be represented in our analysis as a cash flow in Year 0. We assumed that at the end of the expansion project's life, this net working capital would be recovered.

We used Net Present Value (NPV), payback period, discounted payback period and Modified Internal Rate of Return (MIRR) to evaluate the economic feasibility of investing in the potting machine and all other capital expenditures associated with increasing the number of container units sold. To estimate these criteria, we discounted incremental FCF using a weighted average cost of capital (WACC) estimated at 8 percent (Velandia et al., 2026).

Net Present Value (NPV) accounts for the time value of money and indicates how much an investment contributes to owners' wealth. This is why NPV is the preferred criterion for evaluating investment decisions (Brigham & Houston, 2016; Kay, Edwards, & Duffy, 2020). The payback period is the time it takes for the accumulated FCF from the investment to cover the investment costs. The discounted payback period is defined as the number of years before the total investment is fully recovered, plus the unrecovered cost at that point, divided by the discounted incremental FCF in that year (Brigham & Houston, 2016). Finally, we estimated the MIRR to evaluate the rate of return on the expansion project investment, assuming cash flows are reinvested at the WACC (8%).

The NPV for our specific example is defined as,

$$\mathrm{NPV} = \mathrm{CF}_0 + \sum_{\mathrm{i}=1}^{20} \frac{\mathrm{FCF}}{(1+\mathrm{WACC})^{\mathrm{i}}},$$

where $CF_0$ = -$412,635 represents the initial investment, including changes in net working capital; and FCF is the projected FCF associated with the expansion project. In the FCF, we focus on the additional container units sold due to the expansion project, as well as the associated production costs. **The NPV can be interpreted as follows: if the discounted value of FCF due to the expansion project is greater than the investment cost associated with the expansion project, which implies a positive NPV, then that investment is profitable,** and therefore, the decision maker in this case, Carolina Native Nursery, should consider making that investment in the potting machine, the land and the building. **If, on the other hand, the present value of the FCF associated with the expansion project is less than the investment cost, and therefore the NPV is negative, then the investment is not profitable, and the nursery should not proceed with it** (Moss, 2013).

We selected 20 years as the expansion project's life based on the asset with the longest recovery-period classification, which, in this case, is the building. According to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Publication 946 (Internal Revenue Service, 2025a), a farm building, other than a single-purpose agricultural or horticultural structure, is classified as a 20-year recovery-period asset. In year 20, we assumed the nursery could salvage the potting machine for approximately $13,500 , based on the current market value of Javo Plus M2.0 potting machines[11] with approximately 20 years of use. The terminal cash flow in year 20 includes the after-tax salvage value of the potting machine, assuming the salvage value is taxed at the same rate as operating income, as well as the after-tax land value, assuming the land is sold at the end of the 20 years. We assumed the land appreciates at 2 percent per year, with a market value of approximately $178,000 in Year 20. This is a conservative approach, given that land used in this expansion project could be valued at the present-use value (PUV). According to the North Carolina Department of Revenue, local property division property tax section (North Carolina Department of Revenue, 2019), the PUV is the value of land in its current use as horticultural land based solely on its ability to produce income and assuming an average level of management, which could result in a higher value based on projected sales revenue in Year 20.

We used the 2026 average estimated wholesale prices for #1 and #3 containers to estimate sales revenue. Additional units sold due to the expansion project are estimated as 20% in Year 1, 25 percent in Year 2 and 30 percent in Year 3 and thereafter, of the 2023 baseline container units sold for #1 and #3 containers, respectively. Additional azalea sales will not be included in the analysis until Year 3, given the assumption that azalea production will not be back on track after Hurricane Helene until then. Variable costs associated with the production of #1 and #3 containers are estimated at $3.80 and $8.47 per container, respectively, based on 2026 input prices, and include plant, containers, media/substrate, fertilizer, rice hulls and labor costs for potting, pruning and other input applications. Given the challenge of projecting sales price growth over 20 years, we assumed a conservative approach with prices increasing at 5 percent per year. We assumed a 3 percent per year increase in input costs, based on the average year-to-year increases between 2022 and 2025, as reflected in the calculated index of prices paid by growers in the green industry (Hall, 2026).

Carolina Native Nursery is an LLC. We assumed that, as an LLC with only one member, Carolina Native Nursery is treated as a disregarded entity separate from its owner; therefore, the LLC's activities are reflected on the owner's tax returns (Internal Revenue Service, 2026). The tax rate for Carolina Native Nursery is estimated at 31.99 percent. According to the North Carolina Department of Revenue, the state tax rate for individuals will be 3.99 percent after the 2025 taxable year (North Carolina Department of Revenue, 2026). The federal tax rate depends on the bracket the individual is in. We assume the median marginal tax rate of 28 percent (Internal Revenue Service, 2025b). So, the total tax rate would be 28 percent + 3.99 percent, for a total of 31.99 percent. We used the Modified Accelerated Cost Recovery System (MACRS) 200 percent declining balance method, under the General Depreciation System (GDS), to estimate the depreciation of the potting machine and extensions or attachments associated with the expansion project, which are classified as seven-year recovery period assets according to IRS Publication 946 (Internal Revenue Service, 2025a). Specifically, we multiplied the initial investment value for the potting machine and attachments ($100,000) by the appropriate percentages or recovery rates for a seven-year asset, using the mid-quarter convention for agricultural equipment put in service in the first quarter of 2024, according to IRS Publication 946 (Internal Revenue Service, 2025a). For the building housing the potting machine, we used the straight-line method with the mid-quarter convention for agricultural property put in service in the first quarter of 2024, according to IRS Publication 946 (Internal Revenue Service, 2025a).

## 7. The Economics of the Expansion Project

As stated above, the FCFs associated with the expansion project mainly reflect increased container units sold and their associated production costs. Table 1 shows the estimated NPV, payback period and discounted payback period. The expansion project shows a positive NPV ($1.5 million), meaning it adds value to the owner's wealth. The payback period is over 3.5 years, suggesting it takes over three years to recover the investment in the potting machine. When accounting for the time value of money, as reflected by the discounted payback period, it would take slightly over four years to recover the initial investment. Finally, the MIRR suggested an investment rate of return of 17 percent, which is above the minimum return the company must generate to satisfy its investors and lenders (8 percent). All these metrics suggest that the investment in the expansion project is profitable, and the nursery should proceed with it.

**Table 1. Net Present Value, Discounted Payback Period, and Modified Internal Rate of Return estimates for the Javo Plus M2.0 Potting Machine Investment**

| | Double Declining Depreciation Method |
|---|---|
| **NPV** | $1.5 million |
| **Payback Period** | 3.7 years |
| **Discounted Payback Period** | 4.4 years |
| **MIRR** | 17% |

## 8. Discussion

The example above suggests that Carolina Native Nursery's decision to invest in a potting machine was financially sound under the assumptions used in this analysis, given their main goal of increasing the number of containers produced and sold to meet increasing demand. So, to the initial question in the title of this publication, "Can One Machine Fuel a Nursery's Growth?" the answer is yes.

In this analysis, we assumed yearly sales growth rates (i.e., between 20 and 30 percent) that are specific to this nursery. Because this nursery focuses on a niche market, native plants, it is able to capture a large percentage of the increase over time in the quantity of these types of plants customers are willing and able to purchase at prevailing market conditions. Sales growth tied to increases in the quantities customers are willing and able to purchase may change as consumer preferences evolve. Another important consideration is that, because the nursery topography does not allow a horticultural forklift to move plants to and from the field and given their current labor force availability, they are probably using only a percentage of the potting machine's full capacity. Therefore, they could still make adjustments to the potting line to increase the number of containers potted per year. Nonetheless, the current available space (land) may also limit how many containers they can move through the potting line per year. Finally, we acknowledge that the analysis above ignored uncertainty in sale prices and input costs. Future studies could evaluate the likelihood of profitability under uncertainty by conducting a stochastic discounted cash flow simulation analysis.

## 9. Acknowledgments

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## 11. Footnotes and Online Resources

1. AdeptAg: adeptag.com/
2. Bouldin and Lawson: bouldinlawson.com/
3. Javo: javo.eu/en/applications/potting-machines/
4. Mayer: mayer.de/en/planting-systems/products/#filling
5. Pack Manufacturing: packmfg.com/
6. Urbinati: urbinati.com/en/products/potting-machine-for-nurseries/
7. StiltPro: stilt.pro/
8. TTA-ISO potting machines: tta-iso.com/
9. Javo Plus M2.0 potting machine: javo.eu/en/product/javo-plus-m2-0/
10. MIT living wage calculator: livingwage.mit.edu/
11. Heto Agrotechnics (salvaging Javo machine): tiny.utk.edu/4z7OH




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