

US Patent & Trademark Office

Patent Public Search | Text View

United States Patent Application Publication

20250248344

Kind Code

A1

Publication Date

August 07, 2025

Inventor(s)

CANIPE; Tracy Alan et al.

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR HIGH-DENSITY INDOOR FARMING

Abstract

The present disclosure relates to a module and system for indoor farming. In some embodiments, an indoor farming module includes a container compartment divided into a grow zone and a control zone, wherein a grow zone comprises a chassis with a plurality of horizontal and vertical frame members configured to support a plurality of carts each carrying a tray with a plurality of plants and wherein the control zone includes an air blowing unit integrated so as to direct air between a drop ceiling and a structural ceiling of the indoor farming module and an air conditioning unit configured to condition an atmosphere in the grow zone by producing cool dry air that is blown into a plenum space located between the drop ceiling and a structural ceiling.

Inventors: CANIPE; Tracy Alan (Hickory, NC), ZELKIND; Michael (Hamilton, OH), LIVINGSTON; Patricia (Hamilton, OH)

Applicant: 80 ACRES URBAN AGRICULTURE INC. (Hamilton, OH)

Family ID: 73046158

Appl. No.: 19/185659

Filed: April 22, 2025

Related U.S. Application Data

parent US continuation 18302524 20230418 PENDING child US 19185659

parent US continuation 16870675 20200508 parent-grant-document US 11672209 child US 18302524

us-provisional-application US 62845822 20190509

Publication Classification

Int. Cl.: A01G9/24 (20060101); **A01G9/18** (20060101); **A01G9/20** (20060101); **B25J9/16** (20060101)

U.S. Cl.:

CPC A01G9/246 (20130101); **A01G9/18** (20130101); **A01G9/20** (20130101); **A01G9/247** (20130101); **A01G9/249** (20190501); **B25J9/1679** (20130101);

Background/Summary

[0001] This application claims the benefit of and is a continuation patent application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 18/302,524, filed on Apr. 18, 2023, which is a continuation patent application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 16/870,675, filed on May 8, 2020 and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 11,672,209, which claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 62/845,822, filed May 9, 2019. Each of these applications is incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] This disclosure relates generally to indoor farming systems and, more particularly, to a method and apparatus for indoor farming using a high-density indoor farming module.

BACKGROUND

[0003] Global food production systems need to address significant challenges in the coming decades. Finding ways to feed a growing global population whilst reducing environmental impact of agricultural activities is of critical importance. Controlled environment agriculture (CEA), which includes greenhouses and indoor farming, offers a realistic alternative to conventional production for some crops. Vertical indoor farming allows for faster, more controlled production, irrespective of season. Further, vertical indoor farming is not vulnerable to other environmental variability such as pests, pollution, heavy metals, and pathogens. Vertical indoor farming can also reduce environmental impact offering no loss of nutrient, reduced land requirement, better control of waste, less production loss, reduced transportation cost, and reduced clean water usage. Therefore, vertical indoor farming can help to address the significant challenges.

[0004] Current methods and systems for vertical indoor farming, however, are relatively expensive to implement and do not efficiently utilize the available space within a room or container for growing crops. For example, to implement an indoor farming system, an enclosed room or container must be provided and thereafter configured for growing crops or plants in a controllable environment. Environmental parameters such as lighting, temperature, humidity and airflow are controllable within the room or container to achieve the benefits of indoor farming discussed above. Such environmental control, however, requires relatively expensive sensor and control systems. Additionally, shelving and/or racks for holding the plants must be placed within the room or container, and for rooms or containers having a relatively large size, space is allocated within the room or container for allowing human operators to walk inside the enclosed room or container to access each of the shelves and/or racks. Thus, much of the space within the room or container is not allocated for growing plants but instead for allowing human access and movement within the room or container. This is an inefficient utilization of valuable and limited space within an enclosed room or container for growing plants/crops. Therefore, current methods and systems for indoor farming are not satisfactory.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0005] Aspects of the invention are best understood from the following detailed description when read with the accompanying figures. It is noted that various features are not necessarily drawn to scale. In fact, the dimensions and geometries of the various features may be arbitrarily increased or reduced for clarity of illustration.

[0006] FIG. 1A illustrates a perspective view of a standard shipping container that can be used to provide an indoor farming container or module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0007] FIG. 1B illustrates an exemplary perspective view of an indoor farming module **100** open at one end to reveal a plurality of vertical layers of plant trays, each vertical layer having a plurality of rows of plant trays and extending across an entire interior width of the module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0008] FIG. 2 illustrates an exemplary side view of an indoor farming module **100** with an air circulation system, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0009] FIGS. 3A-3C illustrate patterns of air circulation provided by an air circulation system in an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0010] FIGS. 4A-4D illustrate exemplary side views and a top view of an indoor farming module **100** with a water circulation system and a lighting system, in accordance with some embodiments of invention.

[0011] FIGS. 5A-5B illustrate zoomed-in front view and perspective view of an exemplary horizontal frame assembly **500** of the chassis **104** of an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. **100**.

[0012] FIGS. 6A-6B illustrate a stepper motor assembly **600**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0013] FIGS. 7A-7B illustrate a tray drain insert, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0014] FIGS. 8A-8E illustrate an exemplary cart design in an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0015] FIG. 9A illustrates an exemplary diagram of a tray-handling system **900** for an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0016] FIG. 9B illustrates an exemplary block diagram of a controller for an indoor farming module, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0017] FIG. 10A-10F illustrate exemplary perspective views of an attachment **1000** for an articulated robot in a tray-handling system **900**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0018] FIG. 11 illustrates an exemplary block diagram of a control system **1100** in an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

[0019] FIGS. 12A-12B illustrate perspective views of an indoor farming module **1200**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EXEMPLARY EMBODIMENTS

[0020] Various exemplary embodiments of the invention are described below with reference to the accompanying figures to enable a person of ordinary skill in the art to make and use the invention. As would be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art, after reading the present disclosure, various changes or modifications to the examples described herein can be made without departing from the scope of the invention. Thus, the present invention is not limited to the exemplary embodiments and applications described or illustrated herein. Additionally, the specific order or hierarchy of steps in the methods disclosed herein are merely exemplary approaches. Based upon design preferences, the specific order or hierarchy of steps of the disclosed methods or processes can be re-arranged while remaining within the scope of the present invention. Thus, those of

ordinary skill in the art will understand that the methods and techniques disclosed herein present various steps or acts in a sample order, and the invention is not limited to the specific order or hierarchy presented unless expressly stated otherwise.

[0021] Embodiments of the present invention are described in detail with reference to the accompanying drawings. The same or similar components may be designated by the same or similar reference numerals although they are illustrated in different drawings. Specific examples of components and arrangements are described below to simplify the present disclosure. These are, of course, merely examples and are not intended to be limiting. For example, it will be understood that when an element is referred to as being “connected to” or “coupled to” another element, it may be directly connected to or coupled to the other element, or one or more intervening elements may be present.

[0022] FIG. 1A illustrates a perspective view of a container or enclosure **100** that may be utilized to provide an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments. In some embodiments, the container **100** is a standard shipping container used for shipping merchandise across oceans or seas, typically on cargo tankers, and thereafter loadable and shipped on land via “18-wheeler” trucks. Such standard shipping containers are ubiquitous today and used shipping container can be purchased at relatively inexpensive prices. Thus, “ready made” containers that are relatively inexpensive can be retrofitted into indoor farming modules **100**, in accordance with various embodiments of the invention, as described in further detail below. The standard shipping containers **100** are typically constructed of steel and are fully enclosed. As shown in FIG. 1A, a typical shipping container **100** is in the form an elongated rectangular box having a roof **120**, floor **130**, two side walls **140**, a front wall **150** and a rear wall **160**. In some embodiments, double doors (not shown) are provided on the front wall **150** to allow access to crops or plants (hereinafter collectively referred to as “crops”) within the container **100** (e.g., for loading, unloading, inspecting, treating, etc.). Various types of doors (e.g., single, double, garage-type door, rolling-type door, etc.) can be retrofitted onto the front wall **150** as desired, or the existing doors of the standard shipping container **150** can be used. Similarly, the rear wall **160** can be retrofitted with various types of doors to allow personnel to access environmental control systems and equipment located at the rear area of the container **100**, as discussed in further detail below.

[0023] Standard shipping containers typically have a length (L) of 40 feet, a height (H) of 9 feet and 6 inches, and a width (W) of 8 feet. The inventors have discovered that the dimensions of standard shipping containers, especially when occupied to maximum capacity with crops and provided with environmental controls for year-round farming, provide a cost-effective approach to indoor farming. However, it is understood that in alternative embodiments, the invention is not limited to retrofitting standard shipping containers to provide indoor farming modules **100**. Other types of enclosures, containers, or structures having similar or different dimensions, and made with the same or different materials, can be utilized based on the principles of the invention disclosed herein, in accordance with various alternative embodiments of the invention.

[0024] FIG. 1B illustrates an exemplary perspective view of an indoor farming module **100** with the front wall **150** opened or removed for purposes of showing an interior compartment **102** of the container **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. In the illustrated embodiments, an air circulation system, a liquid circulation system, and a lighting system, which are discussed separately in detail below, are omitted in the indoor farming module **100** for clarity of illustration purposes. As shown in FIG. 1B, the indoor farming module **100** comprises an interior compartment **102**. In some embodiments, the module **100** is a standard refrigerated shipping container that is retrofitted for indoor farming, as described in further detail below. In the illustrated embodiment, the indoor farming module **100** comprises a chassis **104**. In some embodiments, the chassis **104** comprises a plurality of vertical frame members and a plurality of horizontal frame members. In the illustrated embodiments, the chassis **104** comprises 4 tiers, i.e., a first tier **106-1**, a second tier **106-2**, a third tier **106-3** and a fourth tier **106-4**. Each of the 4 tiers **106** of the chassis

104 extends from a first wall **108-1** to a second wall **108-2** of the container compartment **102** in a first direction (i.e., x direction). In some embodiments, the first wall **108-1** and the second wall **108-2** are sidewalls along the long side of the container compartment **102**.

[0025] Each of the 4 tiers **106** of the chassis **104** comprises three pairs of guide rails **110** extending along a second direction (i.e., y direction) perpendicular to the first direction. In some embodiments, the three pairs of guide rails **110** are parallel and configured side-by-side to one another so that the three pairs of guide rails in a tier **106** occupy the entire width of the container compartment **102** (i.e., space between the first wall **108-1** and the second wall **108-2**).

[0026] In the illustrated embodiments, a plurality of carts **112** with wheels sized and spaced to roll on the pair of guide rails **110** are moveably positioned within the chassis **104**. Each of the plurality of carts **112** is detachably linked to an adjacent cart **112** on the same pair of guide rails **110** through a cart coupler (not shown), as discussed in further detail below. In some embodiments, the cart coupler is also configured to be coupled and secured to an articulated robot when being transferred, as described in further detail below. Each of the plurality of carts **112** in the indoor farming module **100** is configured to carry a tray, which contains a seed pod (not shown) in which a plurality of plants are planted. In some embodiments, the seed pod comprises a plurality of holes and an arrangement of holes is determined according to a growth condition of the plurality of plants. In some embodiments, each of the three pairs of guide rails can carry 8 carts and the indoor farming module **100** can carry a maximum number of 96 carts.

[0027] A lighting assembly and a water circulation assembly are mounted on the plurality of horizontal frame members of the chassis **104** so as to provide light illumination and liquid supply to each of the trays in the corresponding cart, in accordance with some embodiments, and as discussed in further detail below. In some embodiments, the container compartment **102** is fully closed using a roll-up door (not shown) on a first end so as to maintain the growth condition (e.g., humidity, temperature, CO₂ level, etc.) within a fully enclosed environment. The roll-up door is opened when a cart is being transferred in or out of the compartment **102**, for example. It is noted that the indoor farming module **100** illustrated in FIGS. 1A and 1B, is merely an example, and is not intended to limit the invention. Accordingly, it is understood that a chassis in the indoor farming module **100** of FIG. 1 can be configured with any numbers of tiers **106**, any numbers of guide rails **110**, and can carry any numbers of carts **112**, in accordance with various embodiments of the invention.

[0028] FIG. 2 illustrates an exemplary side view of indoor farming module **100** with an air circulation system, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. In the illustrated embodiments, a liquid circulation system, and a lighting system, which are discussed in detail below, are omitted for clarity of illustration purposes. In the illustrated embodiments, the indoor farming module **100** comprises a container compartment **102**, wherein the container compartment **102** is divided into two zones along the Y direction, i.e., a first zone **202** and a second zone **204**. In some embodiments, the first zone **202** is a grow zone and the second zone **204** is a control zone. In some embodiments, the first zone **202** comprises a chassis **104** with a plurality of horizontal and vertical frame members to support a plurality of carts **112**, wherein the plurality of carts **112** each carries a tray with a plurality of plants (not shown), as described above. In some embodiments, the container compartment **102** is configured with a roll-up door **218** on a first end of the container compartment **102**. Furthermore, the container compartment **102** comprises a structural floor **222**.

[0029] In some embodiments, the second zone **204** comprises an air blowing unit **206**, an air conditioning unit **208**, and at least one dehumidifier **210**. In the illustrated embodiment, the first zone **202** further comprises a drop ceiling **212**, which is coupled to the air blowing unit **206**. In some embodiments, the air blowing unit **206**, the air conditioning unit **208**, the at least one dehumidifier **210**, and the drop ceiling **212** are configured to provide an effective air circulation system at controlled temperatures for the plurality of plants on each of the plurality of carts **112** at different tiers **106** of the chassis **104** in the first zone **202** of the container compartment **102**. The air

flow pattern which is created by these components of the air circulation system are discussed in detail below. In some embodiments, the control zone **204** further comprises a control panel **214**, which is configured to monitor, maintain, and control environmental parameters in the indoor farming module **100**, which is discussed in detail below. In some embodiments, the at least one dehumidifier **210** in the control zone **204** is mounted through the rear wall **160** of the indoor farming module **100** at a second end and supported by a rack **216**.

[0030] FIGS. **3A-3B** illustrate patterns of air circulation provided by an air circulation system in an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. FIG. **3A** is a cross-sectional side view, FIG. **3B** is a cross-sectional top view of the indoor farming module **100**, and FIG. **3C** is a 3 dimensional (3D) view of the indoor farming module **100**. In the illustrated embodiments, the air circulation system comprises an air blowing unit **206**, an air conditioning unit **208**, a drop ceiling **212**, and a de-humidifying unit **210**. In some embodiments, the air blowing unit **206** is sized based on plant mass and container volume. In some embodiments, the air conditioning unit **208** is used to condition the atmosphere in grow zones in the indoor farming module and is sized based on heat generated from a lighting assembly. It is generally desirable to create laminar flow of air in the vicinity of the plants within the grow zone **202**.

[0031] In some embodiments, the air conditioning unit **208** produces cool dry air which is then pulled into the recirculation fans and is forced into the space above the drop ceiling **212** (i.e., a plenum space) located at the top of the grow zone **202**. In some embodiments, the drop ceiling **212** has gaps along the left and right hand sides to facilitate air movement, as discussed in detail below. When the cool air enters the drop ceiling **212**, it becomes pressurized, which causes a positive displacement. The displacement causes a portion of the air to be distributed down the sidewalls. In some embodiments, a motorized damper controls the volume of the remaining air exiting the plenum. In some embodiments, predetermined set points in the control program adjust airflow as plant mass increases during different stages of the growth cycle. In this design, the air circulation system works as a push pull air exchange that is picking up heat and humidity as it travels back to be reconditioned.

[0032] In the illustrated embodiments, the air blowing unit **206** and air conditioning unit **208** are integrated with a second end of the drop ceiling **212** so as to blow air into a plenum space **302** between the drop ceiling **212** and a structural ceiling **220** of the indoor farming module **100**. In some embodiments, a height **304** of the plenum space is predetermined or fixed. For example, in one embodiment, the height **304** of plenum space **302** is 6 inches. In some embodiments, the height **304** of the plenum space **302**, defined by the drop ceiling **212** and the structural ceiling **220**, can be adjusted, tilted, and customized according to a requirement in growth condition in the indoor farming module **100**. In some embodiments the height **304** of the plenum space **302** is in the range of 5 to 8 inches. It is noted that optimal airflow within the plenum space **302** can be achieved by modifying the size of the plenum space **302** and the output of the air blowing unit **206**. In some embodiments, the airflow exits plenum space **302** at the front end near the front wall **150** at a rate between 1260 ft/min to 1400 ft/min. The speed of the airflow in the plenum space may be proportional to the size of the container or grow zone. In some embodiments, the air circulation system generates airflow at the exit of the plenum in a range of 0.581 to 0.651 ft/min per cubic foot of the grow zone volume.

[0033] In some embodiments, a thickness **308** of the drop ceiling **212** is approximately $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. In some embodiments, the drop ceiling **212** comprises a plurality of panels, wherein each of the plurality of panels comprises fiberglass reinforced plastic (FRP) boards. In some embodiments, the FRP boards are installed at a width of 219.5 centimeters for a length of 1066.80 centimeters. In some embodiments, the air blowing unit **206** comprises at least a fan. In some embodiments, the air blowing unit can provide an air flow in a range of 8520 cubic centimeter per minute.

[0034] In the illustrated embodiment, forced air supply **310** enters the plenum space **302** from a second end after being produced by the air blowing unit **206** and conditioned by the air

conditioning unit **208**. The air blowing unit **206** has a capacity determined according to plant mass and a volume of the container **102**. The forced air supply **310** creates a greater atmospheric pressure in the plenum space **302** resulting in an active circulation of air in the indoor farming module. In some embodiments, the forced air supply **310** from the air blowing unit **206** is cool and dry. In some embodiments, a portion of the forced air supply **310** is directed by the plenum space **302** and discharged horizontally through the plenum space **302** from the second end to a first end. In some embodiments, a motorized damper controls the volume of the portion of the forced air supply **310** existing the first end. The forced air supply **310** is then directed down through a front gap **307** between the drop ceiling **212** and front wall **150** (or roll-up door **218**) of container **102**. In some embodiments, front gap **307** measures between 12 to 17 inches. The forced air supply **310** also flows vertically downward **311** through side diffuser slots **312** between the drop ceiling **212** and the structural side walls **108-1** and **108-2** of the container compartment **102**. In some embodiments, a width **306** of the diffuser slots **312** is approximately 1 and 10/16 inches (4.13 centimeters). In some embodiments, the width **306** of diffuser slot **312** can be varied from 1.5 to 4 inches. In some embodiments, the air circulation system maintains the speed of the vertical airflow **311** between 98 ft/min to 177.17 ft/min (0.5 m/sec to 0.9 m/sec). It should be understood that the speed of the vertical airflow **311** can be reduced below 98 ft/min, but it is preferred that the speed of the vertical airflow not exceed 295 ft/min (1.5 m/sec).

[0035] The downward vertical airflow **311** enters spaces between the plurality of tiers **106** so as to provide efficient air circulation to the plurality of plants in trays. The airflow continues horizontally **313** between the plurality of tiers **106** of chassis **104** in grow zone **202**. The air circulation system of the indoor farming module **100** maintains substantially laminar flow of the horizontal airflow **313** between the plurality of tiers **106** adjacent the plants growing therein. In some embodiments, the air circulation system maintains the speed of the horizontal airflow **313** between 195 ft/min to 295 ft/min (1 m/sec to 1.5 m/sec). In other embodiments, the air circulation system maintains the speed of the horizontal airflow **313** between 19 ft/min to 60 ft/min (0.1 m/sec to 0.3 m/sec). It should be understood that the speed of the horizontal airflow **313** can be reduced to 10 ft/min (0.05 m/sec), but it is preferred that the speed of the horizontal airflow **313** not exceed 390 ft/min (2 m/sec). The speed of the horizontal airflow **313** may be controlled by varying any combination of the following variables: the volume of the grow zone, the output of the air blow unit **206**, the size of plenum space **302**, the gap **307**, the size of the side diffuser slots **312**, and the distance between tiers **106**.

[0036] As the airflow moves past the plants, it is directed to the de-humidifying unit **210** located at the second end of the container compartment **102** under the air blowing unit **206**. In some embodiments, adjacent tiers of trays and the drop ceiling are mounted and configured to aid in this desired directional flow of the air. In some embodiments, the air blowing unit **206** and the air de-humidifying unit **210** can be configured and controlled according humidity data collected by a plurality of humidity sensors distributed in the indoor farming module **100** to help determine the desired flow rate in the module so as to provide optimized growth conditions for the plant in the trays. In some embodiments, the airflow is directly measured by at least one anemometer sensor. Based on upper and lower airflow parameters programed in the control unit, the control unit uses the motorized damper to control the size of the opening.

[0037] In some embodiments, the air flow is controlled by the controller **214**, which can dynamically adjust the air flow according to plant mass as it increases during different stages of a growth cycle. As the dry and cool air enters space between tiers, humidity and temperature of the air flow increase. In some embodiments, the air dehumidifying unit **210** receives humid air return **314** from the grow zone **202** and provides dry air to the air blowing unit **206**. Water condensed from the dehumidifying process is drained to a collection reservoir (not shown) for filtering and recycling. Thus, the air control system described above, and illustrated in FIGS. 3A-3C, facilitates the control of environmental parameters such as temperature, humidity, air content, etc., to

precisely control and maintain optimal or predefined growing conditions within the grow zone **202** depending on the types of crops being grown and the state of their growth cycle, in accordance with various embodiments of the invention.

[0038] FIGS. **4A-4D** illustrate a water circulation system and a lighting system of exemplary indoor farming module **100** with, in accordance with some embodiments of invention. It is noted that the indoor farming module **100** illustrated in FIGS. **4A** and **4D**, is merely an example, and is not intended to limit the invention. Accordingly, it is understood that additional structures and components may be provided in or coupled to the indoor farming module **100** of FIGS. **4A** and **4D**, and/or some other components may be omitted.

[0039] In the illustrated embodiment, each of the 4 tiers **106** of the chassis **104** extends from a first wall **108-1** to a second wall **108-2** of the indoor farming module **100** in a first direction (i.e., x direction). Each of the 4 tiers **106** comprises three pairs of guide rails **110**. A plurality of carts **112** move along each pair of guide rails **110**. Each cart **112** comprises a tray **402** in which a plurality of plants **404** are situated. Each of the carts **112** in the indoor farming module **100** is provided with a lighting assembly **406** above plants **404** and a liquid circulation assembly **408**. In the illustrated embodiment, the lighting assembly **406** and the water circulation assembly **408** are structurally supported on the corresponding horizontal frame members over each of the plurality of carts **112**. In the illustrated embodiments, the liquid circulation assembly **408** comprises a plurality of liquid supply conduits, a plurality of liquid return conduits, a plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies, a plurality of drainage conduits, and a plurality of stepper motor assemblies, which are discussed in further detail below. In some embodiments, the lighting assembly **406** comprises at least one lighting module, which is discussed in further detail below. In some embodiments, the plurality of drainage conduits are coupled together to a drainage collection conduit **412** and further connected to external drainage container.

[0040] FIG. **5A-5B** illustrate details of an exemplary horizontal frame assembly **500** of the chassis **104** of an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. The horizontal frame assembly **500** comprises a horizontal frame member **502**, wherein the horizontal frame member **502** is configured to provide structural support to a liquid circulation assembly **408**, a lighting assembly **406**, a pair of guide tracks **110**, and a leaf guard **504**. In the illustrated embodiments, the liquid circulation assembly **408** comprises a liquid supply conduit **506**, a liquid return conduit **508**, a liquid distribution tube assembly **510**, and a drainage conduit **512**. In some embodiments, the liquid supply conduit **506**, the liquid return conduit **508**, and the drainage conduit **512** are shared by a plurality of trays **402** in a plurality of linked carts **112** located on a pair of guide rails **110**. In some embodiments, the liquid supply conduit **506** and the liquid return conduit **508** are coupled to the horizontal frame member **502** through a water tube bracket **514**. In some embodiments, the liquid supply conduit **506** comprises Schedule 80 PVC and the liquid return conduit **508** comprises stainless steel. In some embodiments, the liquid supply conduit **506** and the liquid return conduit **508** each has a diameter of 1.27 centimeters. In some embodiments, the leaf guard **504** is supported by a supporting bracket **542**, wherein the supporting bracket **542** is further supported on the liquid supply conduit **506** and corresponding guide rails **110**. In some embodiments, the leaf guard **504** is configured to guide leaves that drop from the plants to a tray or cart, which can be removed once the tray or cart is removed from the indoor farming module **100** so as to reduce contamination from rotted vegetation in the indoor farming module **100**.

[0041] In some embodiments, the liquid distribution tube assembly **510** is configured to deliver irrigation liquid from the liquid return conduit **508** to each of the plurality of trays **402** to provide irrigation liquid containing water, nutrient and oxygen to support the growth of the plants in each of the plurality of trays **402**. In some embodiments, the liquid distribution tube assembly **510** further comprises a liquid distribution tube **516**, an aeration unit **518**, and a liquid distribution nozzle **520**. In some embodiments, the aeration unit **518** further increases the oxygen concentration in the irrigation liquid entering the tray **402**. In some embodiments, a level of aeration can be individually

tuned by a valve **522** on the aeration unit **518** according to the required growth conditions for the plants in the indoor farming module **100**.

[0042] In some embodiments, a first end of the liquid return conduit **508** is also equipped with a swivel device **524** to facilitate a rotation motion of the liquid return conduit **508**. In some embodiments, the liquid distribution tube assembly **510** can be rotated along the axis of the liquid return conduit **508** by a stepper motor assembly **526** located at a second end of the liquid return conduit **508**, which is discussed in detail below.

[0043] In some embodiments, the stepper motor assembly **526** is coupled to the liquid return conduit **508** so as to provide a rotation motion to the liquid return conduit **508** in order to engage or disengage the plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies **510** to or from corresponding trays **402**. In some embodiments, the plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies **510** are rotated away from the corresponding trays to allow carts **112** carrying the plurality of trays **402** to move along the pair of guide rails **110**. This facilitates the movement of carts **112** into and out of container **102**. In some embodiments, the stepper motor assembly **526** is coupled to a horizontal frame member **502** at the second end of the chassis **104** through a stepper motor bracket (not shown).

[0044] In the illustrated embodiments, the drainage conduit **512** comprises a plurality of drainage slots **528**. In some embodiments, each of the plurality of drainage slots **528** is configured for receiving drainage liquid from the corresponding tray **402** located over the drainage conduit **512** through a tray drain insert (not shown). In some embodiments, the drainage conduit **512** is configured with a higher end and a lower end to aid the collection of the drainage liquid from the plurality of drainage slots **528**. In some embodiments, the drainage conduit **512** comprises Schedule 80 PVC and has a diameter of 5.08 centimeters.

[0045] In the illustrated embodiment, the lighting assembly **406** supported by the horizontal frame member **502** comprises at least one lighting module **540**. In some embodiments, each of the at least one lighting modules **540** comprises at least one of the following photon illumination sources: an incandescent light, a fluorescent light, a halogen light, a high pressure sodium light, a plasma light, and a light-emitting diode (LED) light, so as to provide photons for the photosynthetic reactions in plants **404** in the corresponding tray **402** within its illumination range. In some embodiments, the at least one lighting module **540** is further coupled to at least one power supply (not shown) to receive electric power. In some embodiments, the power supply for each of the at least one lighting module **540** can be monitored and controlled so as to manage the illumination intensity for the plants **404** in the corresponding tray **402**.

[0046] FIG. 6A illustrates a stepper motor assembly **600**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. FIG. 6B illustrates the stepper motor assembly **600** coupled to the liquid return conduit **508**, in accordance with some embodiments. In the illustrated embodiments, the stepper motor assembly **600** comprises a stepper motor **602**, a coupler **604**, a flag **606**, a proximity sensor bracket **608**, and a proximity sensor **610**. In some embodiments, the stepper motor **602** is configured to provide rotational motion to the liquid return conduit **508**, which in turn rotates corresponding ones of the plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies **510**. In some embodiments, the stepper motor **602** is coupled to the liquid return conduit **508** through the coupler **604**. In some embodiments, the coupler **604** is also a cap configured to prevent irrigation liquid in the liquid return conduit **508** from leaking. In the illustrated embodiments, the flag **608** is attached to the coupler **604** and is configured to provide an indication of an angular position of the plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies **510** attached to the liquid return conduit **508**. In some embodiments, the proximity sensor **610** is supported on the proximity sensor bracket **606**, which is coupled to the stepper motor **602**.

[0047] In some embodiments, the proximity sensor **610** reads a position of the flag **608** so as to determine the angular position of the plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies **510**. In some embodiments, the proximity sensor bracket **606** comprises a curved slot **612**, in which the proximity sensor **610** is positioned. The position of the proximity sensor **610** on the proximity

sensor bracket **606** is determined according to a limit of the angular position of the liquid distribution tube assembly **510** that is limited by the curved slot **612**. In some embodiments, the stepper motor **602** is controlled by an input from a Human-Machine Interface (HMI) touch screen. [0048] FIGS. 7A and 7B illustrate a cross-sectional side view and a top view, respectively, of a tray drain insert **700**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. In the illustrated embodiment, the tray drain insert **700** comprises a tube with an outer surface **702** and an inner surface **704**. The tray drain insert **700** has a first opening **706** at a first end and a second opening **708** at a second end. In some embodiments, the tray drain insert **700** is assembled through a hole **710** located at a bottom of a tray **712** using a nut **714**. In some embodiments, the tray drain insert **700** further comprises at least one hole **716** extending from the outer surface **702** to the inner surface **704** and between the first and second ends. In some embodiments, a liquid level **720** at a steady state is determined according to the position of the at least one hole **716** relative to the bottom surface of the tray **712**. In some embodiments, a distance between the first end of the tray drain insert **700** and the bottom surface of the tray **712** is equal to or smaller than a depth **722** of the tray **712**. In some embodiments, the depth **722** is in a range of 11 centimeters.

[0049] In some embodiments, when the liquid level **710** increases in the tray **712** and rises above at least one hole **716**, the irrigation liquid is drained through the at least one hole **716** to the second opening **708** on the second end of the tray drain insert **700** to a drainage conduit **512** through a drainage slot **528** located beneath the second opening **708**. In some embodiments, when the at least one hole **716** is blocked and when the liquid level **720** increases further and rises above the first opening **706** of the tray drain insert **700**, the irrigation liquid in the tray **712** can be also drained through the first opening **706** to the second opening **708** and further to the drainage hole **528** of the drainage conduit **512**. As shown in FIG. 7A, the second opening **708** is located directly above the drainage hole **528**, in accordance with some embodiments. In some embodiments, the tray **712** has a width **724** of 60.96 centimeters and a length **726** of 121.92 centimeters. In some embodiments, the drainage conduit **512** comprises a removable cap **728** on one end, which is configured to allow easy flushing of debris and waste out of drainage conduit **512**.

[0050] FIGS. 8A-8E illustrate exemplary perspective views of a cart **800** in an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. In the illustrated embodiment, the cart **800** is configured to hold and transport a tray **402** along a pair of guide rails **110** on a chassis **104** in the indoor farming module **100**. In some embodiments, the cart **800** has a generally horizontal and rectangular base plate **802**. In some embodiments, the base plate **802** comprises a base frame with openings **804** shown in FIG. 8E. The base plate **802** is further configured with two pairs of side edges **806** that face opposite to each other and extend perpendicularly to the base plate **802**. It is understood that other shapes for base are possible and are within the scope of this invention. In the illustrated embodiments, the base of the cart **802** has a length of 120.5 centimeters and a height of the side edges of 5 centimeters. In some embodiments, the cart **800** comprises stainless steel to meet a requirement in humidity and water resistance in the indoor farming module **100**.

[0051] In the illustrated embodiments, the cart **800** further comprises a plurality of cart couplers. In some embodiments, the plurality of cart couplers comprises at least two hooks **808-1** and **808-2** coupled to a first end of the cart **800** and at least two staples **810-1** and **810-2** coupled to a second end of the cart **800**. The cart coupler (i.e., a hook **808** and a corresponding staple **810**) allows an easy engagement of two adjacent carts **800** on a common pair of rails/tracks **110**. In some embodiments, when the two adjacent carts **800** are coupled by the cart coupler **808/810**, the two carts **800** can be moved together along the pair of guide rails **110**. In some embodiments, when a first cart **800-1** is lifted upwardly from the guide rails **110**, as described in further detail below, the at least two hooks **808** of the first cart are decoupled from the at least two staples **810** of the adjacent second cart **800-2**, allowing the first cart **800-1** to be separated from the adjacent cart **800-2** and removed from the indoor farming module **100**. In the illustrated embodiment, four wheels

812 are mounted to the side edges of the cart **800** by attachment devices, such as welds or a carriage bolt, washer and nut (not shown). In the illustrated embodiments, the cart couplers **808/810** are welded at the lower ends of the side edges and a wheel **812** and corresponding axle is coupled to each cart coupler **808** and **810** using known techniques, as shown in FIGS. **8A-8E**.

[0052] FIG. **9A** illustrates an exemplary diagram of a tray-handling system **900** for an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. In the illustrated embodiments, the tray-handling system **900** is designed for automatically loading and unloading carts **112** through a first end of the indoor farming module **100**. In the illustrated embodiment, the tray-handling system **900** comprises an articulated robot **902**, and a robot controller **912**. In some embodiments, the tray-handling system **900** is configured to transfer a predetermined cart from the chassis **104** in the indoor farming module **100** to a predetermined position (e.g., a storage rack **906**). In some embodiments, the tray-handling system **900** is configured to transfer a predetermined cart from the storage rack (not shown) to the chassis **104** of the indoor farming module **100**.

[0053] In some embodiments, the articulated robot **902** is configured outside of the indoor farming module **100**. In some embodiments, the articulated robot **902** comprises a plurality of joints **904** for controlling a plurality of arm segments **906** coupled to corresponding joints **904**. In some embodiments, each of the plurality of joints **904** is coupled to an electric motor (not shown) for providing rotational motion to each of the plurality of joints **904**. In some embodiments, the articulated robot **902** has a plurality of axes **910** allowing the articulated robot **902** to access and accurately load and unload carts **112** in the indoor farming module **100**. In some embodiments, the articulated robot **902** comprises a fork-type attachment **908** to detachably couple a cart **112** during the transfer, which is discussed in further detail below. In the illustrated embodiment, the articulated robot **902** comprises three arm segments **906** and **6** axes of rotation **910**.

[0054] In some embodiments, the robot controller **912** is configured to manage and operate the tray-handling system **900** according to a predetermined rule or a prescheduled task. In some embodiments, the pre-determined rule or the pre-scheduled task is determined according to the growth condition and growth stage of the plants in the tray on the cart **112**. In some embodiments, a second robot (not shown) can be configured adjacent to the articulated robot **902** or the storage rack (not shown) to move the tray out of the cart **112** so that the plants in the tray can be harvested and the cart can be reused. In some embodiments, the robot controller **912** comprises a motion-planning unit, which is used to determine trajectories of the robot so as to move the predetermined tray to a predetermined location and register any changes in positions of other trays in the transferring process of the predetermined tray. In some embodiments, the robot controller **912** is coupled to a cloud computer **914**, which further receives instructions from a controller **214** in the indoor farming module **100** and/or a remote control station **916**. For example, when a cart **112** is determined to be unloaded from the indoor farming module **100**, the controller **214** of the indoor farming module **100** pauses the irrigation schedule, rotates a plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies **510**, and opens a roll-up door **218**, before the articulated robot **902** can be initiated.

[0055] As shown in FIG. **9B**, the robot controller **912** comprises a processor **922**, a memory **924**, an input/output interface **926**, a communications interface **928**, and a system bus **930**, in accordance with some embodiments. The processor **922** may comprise any processing circuitry operative to control the operations and performance of the articulated robot **902** of the tray-handling system **900**. In various aspects, the processor **922** may be implemented as a general purpose processor, a chip multiprocessor (CM P), a dedicated processor, an embedded processor, a digital signal processor (DSP), a network processor, an input/output (I/O) processor, a media access control (M A C) processor, a radio baseband processor, a co-processor, a microprocessor such as a complex instruction set computer (CISC) microprocessor, a reduced instruction set computing (RISC) microprocessor, and/or a very long instruction word (VLIW) microprocessor, or other processing device. The processor **922** also may be implemented by a controller, a microcontroller, an application specific integrated circuit (ASIC), a field programmable gate array (FPGA), a

programmable logic device (PLD), and so forth.

[0056] In various aspects, the processor **922** may be arranged to run an operating system (OS) and various applications. Examples of an OS comprise, for example, operating systems generally known under the trade name of Apple OS, Microsoft Windows OS, Android OS, and any other proprietary or open source OS. Examples of applications comprise, for example, a telephone application, a camera (e.g., digital camera, video camera) application, a browser application, a multimedia player application, a gaming application, a messaging application (e.g., email, short message, multimedia), a viewer application, and so forth.

[0057] In some embodiments, at least one non-transitory computer-readable storage medium is provided having computer-executable instructions embodied thereon, wherein, when executed by at least one processor, the computer-executable instructions cause the at least one processor to perform embodiments of the methods described herein. This computer-readable storage medium can be embodied in the memory **924**.

[0058] In some embodiments, the memory **924** may comprise any machine-readable or computer-readable media capable of storing data, including both volatile/non-volatile memory and removable/non-removable memory. The memory **924** may comprise at least one non-volatile memory unit. The non-volatile memory unit is capable of storing one or more software programs. The software programs may contain, for example, applications, user data, device data, and/or configuration data, or combinations therefore, to name only a few. The software programs may contain instructions executable by the various components of the robot controller **912** of the tray-handling system **900**.

[0059] For example, memory may comprise read-only memory (ROM), random-access memory (RAM), dynamic RAM (DRAM), Double-Data-Rate DRAM (DDR-RAM), synchronous DRAM (SDRAM), static RAM (SRAM), programmable ROM (PROM), erasable programmable ROM (EPROM), electrically erasable programmable ROM (EEPROM), flash memory (e.g., NOR or NAND flash memory), content addressable memory (CAM), polymer memory (e.g., ferroelectric polymer memory), phase-change memory (e.g., ovonic memory), ferroelectric memory, silicon-oxide-nitride-oxide-silicon (SONOS) memory, disk memory (e.g., floppy disk, hard drive, optical disk, magnetic disk), or card (e.g., magnetic card, optical card), or any other type of media suitable for storing information.

[0060] In one embodiment, the memory **924** may contain an instruction set, in the form of a file for executing a method of generating one or more timing libraries as described herein. The instruction set may be stored in any acceptable form of machine-readable instructions, including source code or various appropriate programming languages. Some examples of programming languages that may be used to store the instruction set comprise, but are not limited to: Java, C, C++, C#, Python, Objective-C, Visual Basic, or .NET programming. In some embodiments a compiler or interpreter is comprised to convert the instruction set into machine executable code for execution by the processor.

[0061] In some embodiments, the I/O interface **926** may comprise any suitable mechanism or component to enable a user to provide input to the robot controller **912** of the tray-handling system **900** and the robot controller **912** to provide output to the user. For example, the I/O interface **926** may comprise any suitable input mechanism, including but not limited to, a button, keypad, keyboard, click wheel, touch screen, or motion sensor. In some embodiments, the I/O interface **926** may comprise a capacitive sensing mechanism, or a multi-touch capacitive sensing mechanism (e.g., a touchscreen).

[0062] In some embodiments, the I/O interface **926** may comprise a visual peripheral output device for providing a display visible to the user. For example, the visual peripheral output device may comprise a screen such as, for example, a Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) screen, incorporated into the robot controller **912** of the tray-handling system **900**. As another example, the visual peripheral output device may comprise a movable display or projecting system for providing a display of

content on a surface remote from the robot controller **912** of the tray-handling system **900**. In some embodiments, the visual peripheral output device can comprise a coder/decoder, also known as a Codec, to convert digital media data into analog signals. For example, the visual peripheral output device may comprise video Codecs, audio Codecs, or any other suitable type of Codec.

[0063] The visual peripheral output device also may comprise display drivers, circuitry for driving display drivers, or both. The visual peripheral output device may be operative to display content under the direction of the processor. For example, the visual peripheral output device may be able to play media playback information, application screens for applications implemented on the robot controller **912** of the tray-handling system **900**, information regarding ongoing communications operations, information regarding incoming communications requests, or device operation screens, to name only a few.

[0064] In some embodiments, the communications interface **928** may comprise any suitable hardware, software, or combination of hardware and software that is capable of coupling the robot controller **912** of the tray-handling system **900** to one or more networks and/or additional devices. The communications interface **928** may be arranged to operate with any suitable technique for controlling information signals using a desired set of communications protocols, services or operating procedures. The communications interface **928** may comprise the appropriate physical connectors to connect with a corresponding communications medium, whether wired or wireless.

[0065] Systems and methods of communication comprise a network, in accordance with some embodiments. In various aspects, the network may comprise local area networks (LAN) as well as wide area networks (WAN) including without limitation Internet, wired channels, wireless channels, communication devices including telephones, computers, wire, radio, optical or other electromagnetic channels, and combinations thereof, including other devices and/or components capable of/associated with communicating data. For example, the communication environments comprise in-body communications, various devices, and various modes of communications such as wireless communications, wired communications, and combinations of the same.

[0066] Wireless communication modes comprise any mode of communication between points (e.g., nodes) that utilize, at least in part, wireless technology including various protocols and combinations of protocols associated with wireless transmission, data, and devices. The points comprise, for example, wireless devices such as wireless headsets, audio and multimedia devices and equipment, such as audio players and multimedia players, telephones, including mobile telephones and cordless telephones, and computers and computer-related devices and components, such as printers, network-connected machinery such as a circuit generating system, and/or any other suitable device or third-party device.

[0067] Wired communication modes comprise any mode of communication between points that utilize wired technology including various protocols and combinations of protocols associated with wired transmission, data, and devices. The points comprise, for example, devices such as audio and multimedia devices and equipment, such as audio players and multimedia players, telephones, including mobile telephones and cordless telephones, and computers and computer-related devices and components, such as printers, network-connected machinery, and/or any other suitable device or third-party device. In various implementations, the wired communication modules may communicate in accordance with a number of wired protocols. Examples of wired protocols may comprise Universal Serial Bus (USB) communication, RS-232, RS-422, RS-423, RS-485 serial protocols, FireWire, Ethernet, Fiber Channel, MIDI, ATA, Serial ATA, PCI Express, T-1 (and variants), Industry Standard Architecture (ISA) parallel communication, Small Computer System Interface (SCSI) communication, or Peripheral Component Interconnect (PCI) communication, to name only a few examples.

[0068] Accordingly, in various aspects, the communications interface **928** may comprise one or more interfaces such as, for example, a wireless communications interface, a wired communications interface, a network interface, a transmit interface, a receive interface, a media

interface, a system interface, a component interface, a switching interface, a chip interface, a controller, and so forth. When implemented by a wireless device or within wireless system, for example, the communications interface may comprise a wireless interface comprising one or more antennas, transmitters, receivers, transceivers, amplifiers, filters, control logic, and so forth. [0069] In various embodiments, the communications interface **928** may provide voice and/or data communications functionality in accordance a number of wireless protocols. Examples of wireless protocols may comprise various wireless local area network (WLAN) protocols, including the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) 802.xx series of protocols, such as IEEE 802.11a/b/g/n, IEEE 802.16, IEEE 802.20, and so forth. Other examples of wireless protocols may comprise various wireless wide area network (WWAN) protocols, such as GSM cellular radiotelephone system protocols with GPRS, CDMA cellular radiotelephone communication systems with 1×RTT, EDGE systems, EV-DO systems, EV-DV systems, HSDPA systems, and so forth. Further examples of wireless protocols may comprise wireless personal area network (PAN) protocols, such as an Infrared protocol, a protocol from the Bluetooth Special Interest Group (SIG) series of protocols, including Bluetooth Specification versions v1.0, v1.1, v1.2, v2.0, v2.0 with Enhanced Data Rate (EDR), as well as one or more Bluetooth Profiles, and so forth. Yet another example of wireless protocols may comprise near-field communication techniques and protocols, such as electromagnetic induction (EMI) techniques. An example of EMI techniques may comprise passive or active radio-frequency identification (RFID) protocols and devices. Other suitable protocols may comprise Ultra Wide Band (UWB), Digital Office (DO), Digital Home, Trusted Platform Module (TPM), ZigBee, and so forth.

[0070] The system bus **930** couples the processor **922**, the memory **924**, the I/O interface **926**, and the communication interface **928** to one another, as necessary. The system bus **930** can be any of several types of bus structure(s) including a memory bus or memory controller, a peripheral bus or external bus, and/or a local bus using any variety of available bus architectures including, but not limited to, 9-bit bus, Industrial Standard Architecture (ISA), Micro-Channel Architecture (MCA), Extended ISA (EISA), Intelligent Drive Electronics (IDE), VESA Local Bus (VLB), Personal Computer Memory Card International Association (PCMCIA) Bus, Small Computer System Interface (SCSI) or other proprietary bus, or any custom bus suitable for computing device applications.

[0071] FIGS. **10A-10F** illustrate exemplary perspective views of a fork-type attachment **1000** for the articulated robot **902** in the tray-handling system **900**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. In some embodiments, the attachment **1000** is configured to secure a cart **112** during a transfer process. In the illustrated embodiments, the attachment **1000** comprises a support frame **1002** and a pair of load forks **1004** mounted on and extending outwardly from the support frame **1002**. In some embodiments, the support frame **1002** is mounted on a base **1006**, which allows the attachment **1000** to be mounted on a segment of the articulated robot **902**. In some embodiments, the support frame **1002** comprises two extensions **1008** at two opposite ends of the supporting frame **1002**. In some embodiments, each of the two extensions **1008** supports a linear motor **1010** and a ball screw **1016**. In some embodiments, a shaft **1014** is guided by the ball screw **1016** so as to transfer a rotation motion of the shaft **1014** to a linear motion of a head **1012** attached at a lower end of each shaft **1014**.

[0072] In some embodiments, a first distance **1018** between the two heads **1012** is determined according to a second distance between two staples **810** on a cart **112** so as to allow the two heads **1012** to couple to the two staples **810** on the cart **112**. In some embodiments, each of the two heads **1012** comprises two notches **1030**, which are separated by a third distance **1036**, wherein the third distance **1036** is determined by a width **812** of the staples **810** on the cart **112**. As illustrated in FIG. **10F**, in some embodiments, each of the two heads **1012** comprises a latch **1032** with a width **1034** which is smaller than the width of the staples **810**. In some embodiments, the latch **1032** is separated from the support frame **1002** by a fourth distance **1036**, wherein the fourth distance **1036**

is greater than a thickness **814** of the staples **810**.

[0073] In some embodiments, the attachment **1000** further comprises a liquid collection assembly. In some embodiments, the liquid collection assembly comprises a base plate **1022** with a trench **1024**, wherein the base plate **1022** is coupled to the support frame **1002** on a first side. In some embodiments, the position of the trench **1024** on the base plate **1022** is determined according to a position of the tray drain insert **700** in a tray on the cart **112**, as described above, so as to allow a collection of irrigation liquid draining from the tray. In some embodiments, the liquid collection assembly further comprises a reservoir **1026**. In some embodiments, the reservoir **1026** is attached to the support frame **1002** on a second side. In some embodiments, the reservoir **1026** is configured to temporarily store the irrigation liquid collected from the trench **1024** through an opening **1020** on the support frame **1002**. In some embodiments, the liquid collection assembly comprises stainless steel.

[0074] FIG. **11** illustrates an exemplary block diagram of a control system **1100** in an indoor farming module **100**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. It is noted that the control system **1100** is merely an example, and is not intended to limit the invention. Accordingly, it is understood that additional functional blocks may be provided in or coupled to the control system **1100** of FIG. **11**, and that some other functional blocks may be omitted or only briefly described herein. It should be also noted that the functionalities provided in each of the components and modules of the control system **1100** can be combined or separated into one or more modules.

[0075] In some embodiments, the control system **1100** comprises a controller **1102**. In some embodiments, the controller **1102** is configured to regulate environmental parameters of the indoor farming module **100**, and coordinate a tray loading/unloading process. In some embodiments, the control system **1100** further comprises five sub-systems, including a tray-handling system **1104**, an air circulation system **1106**, a liquid circulation system **1108**, a lighting management system **1110**, and a vision system **1112**.

[0076] In the illustrated embodiments, the tray-handling system **1104** is designed for automatically loading and unloading carts **112** through a first end of the indoor farming module **100**. In the illustrated embodiment, the tray-handling system **1104** comprises an articulated robot **902** and a robot controller **904**, as described above. In some embodiments, the tray-handling system **1104** is configured to transfer a predetermined cart from the chassis **104** in the indoor farming module **100** to a predetermined position (e.g., a storage rack **906**). In some embodiments, when inserting new crops into the indoor farming module **100**, the tray-handling system **1104** is configured to transfer a predetermined cart from the storage rack **906** to the chassis **104** of the indoor farming module **100**.

[0077] In some embodiments, the air circulation system **1106** comprises an air blowing unit **206**, an air conditioning unit **208**, an air dehumidifying unit **210**, and a drop ceiling **212**, as described above. In some embodiments, the air blowing unit **206**, the air conditioning unit **208**, the at least one dehumidifying unit **210**, and the drop ceiling **212** are configured to provide effective regulation of humidity, CO₂ level, air flow and temperature for the plurality of plants on each of the plurality of carts **112** at different tiers **106** of the chassis **104** in the grow zone **202** of the container compartment **102**.

[0078] In some embodiments, the liquid circulation system **1108** comprises a plurality of liquid supply conduits **506**, a plurality of liquid return conduits **508**, a plurality of drainage conduits **512**, and a plurality of liquid distribution tube assembly **510**, as described above. In further embodiments, the liquid circulation system **1108** can include a drainage liquid reservoir, at least one filter, a liquid supply reservoir, a plurality of nutrient reservoirs, a temperature control unit, a pH control unit, an oxygen-level control unit (not shown), each operatively coupled to the plurality of liquid supply conduits **506** and/or the plurality of liquid return conduits **508** for controlling the contents and characteristics (e.g., temperature, pH, etc.) of the liquid flowing through the liquid circulation system **1108**. In some embodiments, the liquid circulation system **1108** regulates a nutrient level, an oxygen level, a pH level, a temperature and a particle level in the irrigation liquid

to support the growth of plants in the trays of the indoor farming module **100**.

[0079] In the illustrated embodiment, the lighting management system **1110** comprises a plurality of lighting modules and each of the plurality of lighting modules comprises at least one of the following photon sources: an incandescent light, a fluorescent light, a halogen light, a high pressure sodium light, a plasma light, and a light-emitting diode (LED) light, so as to provide photons for the photosynthetic reactions in plants. In some embodiments, the photon sources is selected according to a desired light spectrum for the plants. In some embodiments, the lighting management system **1110** further comprises at least one power supply to power the plurality of lighting modules. In some embodiments, the at least one power supply can be controlled so as to regulate the light intensity, uniformity and light spectrum to provide a desired illumination to the plants in the indoor farming module **100**.

[0080] In some embodiments, the control system **1100** further comprises a vision system **1112**. In some embodiments, the vision system **1112** comprises at least one camera and at least one light source. In some embodiments, the vision system **1112** is configured outside of the indoor farming module **100** for security purposes. In some embodiments, the vision system **1112** can be also configured in the indoor farming module **100** for monitoring the growth of the plants.

[0081] The controller **1102** may comprise a processor, a memory, an input/output interface, a communications interface, and a system bus. The processor may comprise any processing circuitry operative to control the operations and performance of the controller **1102**. In various aspects, the processor may be implemented as a general purpose processor, a chip multiprocessor (CMP), a dedicated processor, an embedded processor, a digital signal processor (DSP), a network processor, an input/output (I/O) processor, a media access control (MAC) processor, a radio baseband processor, a co-processor, a microprocessor such as a complex instruction set computer (CISC) microprocessor, a reduced instruction set computing (RISC) microprocessor, and/or a very long instruction word (VLIW) microprocessor, or other processing device. The processor also may be implemented by a controller, a microcontroller, an application specific integrated circuit (ASIC), a field programmable gate array (FPGA), a programmable logic device (PLD), and so forth.

[0082] In various aspects, the processor may be arranged to run an operating system (OS) and various applications. Examples of an OS comprise, for example, operating systems generally known under the trade name of Apple OS, Microsoft Windows OS, Android OS, and any other proprietary or open source OS. Examples of applications comprise, for example, a telephone application, a camera (e.g., digital camera, video camera) application, a browser application, a multimedia player application, a gaming application, a messaging application (e.g., email, short message, multimedia), a viewer application, and so forth.

[0083] In some embodiments, at least one non-transitory computer-readable storage medium is provided having computer-executable instructions embodied thereon, wherein, when executed by at least one processor, the computer-executable instructions cause the at least one processor to perform embodiments of the methods described herein. This computer-readable storage medium can be embodied in the memory.

[0084] In some embodiments, the memory may comprise any machine-readable or computer-readable media capable of storing data, including both volatile/non-volatile memory and removable/non-removable memory. The memory may comprise at least one non-volatile memory unit. The non-volatile memory unit is capable of storing one or more software programs. The software programs may contain, for example, applications, user data, device data, and/or configuration data, or combinations therefore, to name only a few. The software programs may contain instructions executable by the various components of the controller **1102**.

[0085] For example, memory may comprise read-only memory (ROM), random-access memory (RAM), dynamic RAM (DRAM), Double-Data-Rate DRAM (DDR-RAM), synchronous DRAM (SDRAM), static RAM (SRAM), programmable ROM (PROM), erasable programmable ROM (EPROM), electrically erasable programmable ROM (EEPROM), flash memory (e.g., NOR or

NAND flash memory), content addressable memory (CAM), polymer memory (e.g., ferroelectric polymer memory), phase-change memory (e.g., ovonic memory), ferroelectric memory, silicon-oxide-nitride-oxide-silicon (SONOS) memory, disk memory (e.g., floppy disk, hard drive, optical disk, magnetic disk), or card (e.g., magnetic card, optical card), or any other type of media suitable for storing information.

[0086] In one embodiment, the memory may contain an instruction set, in the form of a file for executing a method of generating one or more timing libraries as described herein. The instruction set may be stored in any acceptable form of machine-readable instructions, including source code or various appropriate programming languages. Some examples of programming languages that may be used to store the instruction set comprise, but are not limited to: Java, C, C++, C#, Python, Objective-C, Visual Basic, or .NET programming. In some embodiments a compiler or interpreter is comprised to convert the instruction set into machine executable code for execution by the processor.

[0087] In some embodiments, the I/O interface may comprise any suitable mechanism or component to at least enable a user to provide input to the controller **1102** and the controller **1102** to provide output to the user. For example, the I/O interface may comprise any suitable input mechanism, including but not limited to, a button, keypad, keyboard, click wheel, touch screen, or motion sensor. In some embodiments, the I/O interface may comprise a capacitive sensing mechanism, or a multi-touch capacitive sensing mechanism (e.g., a touchscreen).

[0088] In some embodiments, the I/O interface may comprise a visual peripheral output device for providing a display visible to the user. For example, the visual peripheral output device may comprise a screen such as, for example, a Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) screen, incorporated into the controller **1102**. As another example, the visual peripheral output device may comprise a movable display or projecting system for providing a display of content on a surface remote from the controller **1102**. In some embodiments, the visual peripheral output device can comprise a coder/decoder, also known as a Codec, to convert digital media data into analog signals. For example, the visual peripheral output device may comprise video Codecs, audio Codecs, or any other suitable type of Codec.

[0089] The visual peripheral output device also may comprise display drivers, circuitry for driving display drivers, or both. The visual peripheral output device may be operative to display content under the direction of the processor. For example, the visual peripheral output device may be able to play media playback information, application screens for applications implemented on the controller **1102**, information regarding ongoing communications operations, information regarding incoming communications requests, or device operation screens, to name only a few.

[0090] In some embodiments, the communications interface may comprise any suitable hardware, software, or combination of hardware and software that is capable of coupling the controller **1102** to one or more networks and/or additional devices. The communications interface may be arranged to operate with any suitable technique for controlling information signals using a desired set of communications protocols, services or operating procedures. The communications interface may comprise the appropriate physical connectors to connect with a corresponding communications medium, whether wired or wireless.

[0091] Systems and methods of communication comprise a network, in accordance with some embodiments. In various aspects, the network may comprise local area networks (LAN) as well as wide area networks (WAN) including without limitation Internet, wired channels, wireless channels, communication devices including telephones, computers, wire, radio, optical or other electromagnetic channels, and combinations thereof, including other devices and/or components capable of/associated with communicating data. For example, the communication environments comprise in-body communications, various devices, and various modes of communications such as wireless communications, wired communications, and combinations of the same.

[0092] Wireless communication modes comprise any mode of communication between points (e.g.,

nodes) that utilize, at least in part, wireless technology including various protocols and combinations of protocols associated with wireless transmission, data, and devices. The points comprise, for example, wireless devices such as wireless headsets, audio and multimedia devices and equipment, such as audio players and multimedia players, telephones, including mobile telephones and cordless telephones, and computers and computer-related devices and components, such as printers, network-connected machinery such as a circuit generating system **404**, and/or any other suitable device or third-party device.

[0093] Wired communication modes comprise any mode of communication between points that utilize wired technology including various protocols and combinations of protocols associated with wired transmission, data, and devices. The points comprise, for example, devices such as audio and multimedia devices and equipment, such as audio players and multimedia players, telephones, including mobile telephones and cordless telephones, and computers and computer-related devices and components, such as printers, network-connected machinery, and/or any other suitable device or third-party device. In various implementations, the wired communication modules may communicate in accordance with a number of wired protocols. Examples of wired protocols may comprise Universal Serial Bus (USB) communication, RS-232, RS-422, RS-423, RS-485 serial protocols, FireWire, Ethernet, Fiber Channel, MIDI, ATA, Serial ATA, PCI Express, T-1 (and variants), Industry Standard Architecture (ISA) parallel communication, Small Computer System Interface (SCSI) communication, or Peripheral Component Interconnect (PCI) communication, to name only a few examples.

[0094] Accordingly, in various aspects, the communications interface may comprise one or more interfaces such as, for example, a wireless communications interface, a wired communications interface, a network interface, a transmit interface, a receive interface, a media interface, a system interface, a component interface, a switching interface, a chip interface, a controller, and so forth. When implemented by a wireless device or within wireless system, for example, the communications interface may comprise a wireless interface comprising one or more antennas, transmitters, receivers, transceivers, amplifiers, filters, control logic, and so forth.

[0095] In various embodiments, the communications interface may provide voice and/or data communications functionality in accordance a number of wireless protocols. Examples of wireless protocols may comprise various wireless local area network (WLAN) protocols, including the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) 802.xx series of protocols, such as IEEE 802.11a/b/g/n, IEEE 802.16, IEEE 802.20, and so forth. Other examples of wireless protocols may comprise various wireless wide area network (WWAN) protocols, such as GSM cellular radiotelephone system protocols with GPRS, CDMA cellular radiotelephone communication systems with 1×RTT, EDGE systems, EV-DO systems, EV-DV systems, HSDPA systems, and so forth. Further examples of wireless protocols may comprise wireless personal area network (PAN) protocols, such as an Infrared protocol, a protocol from the Bluetooth Special Interest Group (SIG) series of protocols, including Bluetooth Specification versions v1.0, v1.1, v1.2, v2.0, v2.0 with Enhanced Data Rate (EDR), as well as one or more Bluetooth Profiles, and so forth. Yet another example of wireless protocols may comprise near-field communication techniques and protocols, such as electromagnetic induction (EMI) techniques. An example of EMI techniques may comprise passive or active radio-frequency identification (RFID) protocols and devices. Other suitable protocols may comprise Ultra Wide Band (UWB), Digital Office (DO), Digital Home, Trusted Platform Module (TPM), ZigBee, and so forth.

[0096] In some embodiments, the controller **1102** may comprise a system bus that couples various system components including the processor, the memory, and the I/O interface. The system bus can be any of several types of bus structure(s) including a memory bus or memory controller, a peripheral bus or external bus, and/or a local bus using any variety of available bus architectures including, but not limited to, 9-bit bus, Industry Standard Architecture (ISA), Micro-Channel Architecture (MCA), Extended ISA (EISA), Intelligent Drive Electronics (IDE), VESA Local Bus

(VLB), Personal Computer Memory Card International Association (PCMCIA) Bus, Small Computer System Interface (SCSI) or other proprietary bus, or any custom bus suitable for computing device applications.

[0097] In some embodiments, the controller **1102** is further coupled to a local computer **1116** and further coupled to a remote computer **1118** through a communications network **1114** (e.g., the Internet). In some embodiments, the remote computer **1118** is a mobile device. In alternative embodiments, the remote computer **1118** comprises at least one server computer coupled to a database storing environmental parameters and other data and instructions for analyzing data information provided by each of the sub-systems **1104**, **1106**, **1108**, **1110** and **1112** and thereafter provide further instructions to the controller **1102** and/or the local computer **1116** for automatically monitoring and controlling the operation of the indoor farming module **100** described above.

[0098] FIGS. **12A-12B** illustrate perspective views of an indoor farming module **1200**, in accordance with some embodiments of the invention. In some embodiments, the indoor farming module **1200** comprises a container **1202** and a chassis **1204**. In the illustrated embodiments, the chassis **1204** is manufactured separately from the container **1202**. In some embodiments, the chassis **1204** comprises a plurality of vertical and horizontal frame members and a plurality of wheels so that the chassis **1204** is transferrable into or out of the container compartment **1202**. In some embodiments, the chassis **1204** further comprises a plurality of liquid supply conduits, a plurality of liquid return conduits, a plurality of liquid distribution tube assemblies, a plurality of drainage conduits, and plurality of lighting apparatus, as described above.

[0099] In some embodiments, the container **1202** comprises an air blowing unit **1220**, an air dehumidifying unit **1222**, and a control unit **1224**. In some embodiments, the air blowing unit **1220** is coupled to a drop ceiling (not shown), as discussed in FIGS. **2-3**. In some embodiments, a rack **1210** is mounted on walls on two long sides of the container compartment **1202**. In some embodiments, the rack **1210** comprises a plurality of stepper motor assemblies **600** for receiving the plurality of corresponding liquid return conduits on the chassis **1204**, a plurality of liquid supply slots **1226** for receiving the plurality of corresponding liquid supply conduits on the chassis **1204**, and a plurality of drainage slots **1228** for receiving the plurality of corresponding drainage conduits on the chassis **1204**. In some embodiments, the container compartment **1202** further comprises anchor points on walls and a floor to secure the chassis **1204** when loaded into the container compartment **1202**.

[0100] While various embodiments of the invention have been described above, it should be understood that they have been presented by way of example only, and not by way of limitation. Likewise, the various diagrams may depict an example architectural or configuration, which are provided to enable persons of ordinary skill in the art to understand exemplary features and functions of the invention. Such persons would understand, however, that the invention is not restricted to the illustrated example architectures or configurations, but can be implemented using a variety of alternative architectures and configurations. Additionally, as would be understood by persons of ordinary skill in the art, one or more features of one embodiment can be combined with one or more features of another embodiment described herein. Thus, the breadth and scope of the invention should not be limited by any of the above-described exemplary embodiments.

[0101] It is also understood that any reference to an element herein using a designation such as “first,” “second,” and so forth does not generally limit the quantity or order of those elements. Rather, these designations can be used herein as a convenient means of distinguishing between two or more elements or instances of an element. Thus, a reference to first and second elements does not mean that only two elements can be employed, or that the first element must precede the second element in some manner.

[0102] Additionally, a person having ordinary skill in the art would understand that information and signals can be represented using any of a variety of different technologies and techniques. For example, data, instructions, commands, information, signals, bits and symbols, for example, which

may be referenced in the above description can be represented by voltages, currents, electromagnetic waves, magnetic fields or particles, optical fields or particles, or any combination thereof.

[0103] A person of ordinary skill in the art would further appreciate that any of the various illustrative logical blocks, modules, processors, means, circuits, methods and functions described in connection with the aspects disclosed herein can be implemented by electronic hardware (e.g., a digital implementation, an analog implementation, or a combination of the two, which can be designed using source coding or some other technique), various forms of program or design code incorporating instructions (which can be referred to herein, for convenience, as “software” or a “software module), or combinations of both. To clearly illustrate this interchangeability of hardware and software, various illustrative components, blocks, modules, circuits, and steps have been described above generally in terms of their functionality. Whether such functionality is implemented as hardware, firmware or software, or a combination of these technique, depends upon the particular application and design constraints imposed on the overall system. Skilled artisans can implement the described functionality in various ways for each particular application, but such implementation decisions should not be interpreted as causing a departure from the scope of the invention.

[0104] Furthermore, a person of ordinary skill in the art would understand that various illustrative logical blocks, modules, devices, components and circuits described herein can be implemented within or performed by an integrated circuit (IC) that can include a general purpose processor, a digital signal processor (DSP), an application specific integrated circuit (ASIC), a field programmable gate array (FPGA) or other programmable logic device, or any combination thereof. The logical blocks, modules, and circuits can further include antennas and/or transceivers to communicate with various components within the network or within the device. A general purpose processor can be a microprocessor, but in the alternative, the processor can be any conventional processor, controller, or state machine. A processor can also be implemented as a combination of computing devices, e.g., a combination of a DSP and a microprocessor, a plurality of microprocessors, one or more microprocessors in conjunction with a DSP core, or any other suitable configuration to perform the functions described herein.

[0105] If implemented in software, the functions can be stored as one or more instructions or code on a computer-readable medium. Thus, the steps of a method or algorithm disclosed herein can be implemented as software stored on a computer-readable medium. Computer-readable media includes both computer storage media and communication media including any medium that can be enabled to transfer a computer program or code from one place to another. A storage media can be any available media that can be accessed by a computer. By way of example, and not limitation, such computer-readable media can include RAM, ROM, EEPROM, CD-ROM or other optical disk storage, magnetic disk storage or other magnetic storage devices, or any other medium that can be used to store desired program code in the form of instructions or data structures and that can be accessed by a computer.

[0106] In this document, the term “module” as used herein, refers to software, firmware, hardware, and any combination of these elements for performing the associated functions described herein. Additionally, for purpose of discussion, the various modules are described as discrete modules; however, as would be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art, two or more modules may be combined to form a single module that performs the associated functions according embodiments of the invention.

[0107] Additionally, memory or other storage, as well as communication components, may be employed in embodiments of the invention. It will be appreciated that, for clarity purposes, the above description has described embodiments of the invention with reference to different functional units and processors. However, it will be apparent that any suitable distribution of functionality between different functional units, processing logic elements or domains may be used

without detracting from the invention. For example, functionality illustrated to be performed by separate processing logic elements, or controllers, may be performed by the same processing logic element, or controller. Hence, references to specific functional units are only references to a suitable means for providing the described functionality, rather than indicative of a strict logical or physical structure or organization.

[0108] Various modifications to the implementations described in this disclosure will be readily apparent to those skilled in the art, and the general principles defined herein can be applied to other implementations without departing from the scope of this disclosure. Thus, the disclosure is not intended to be limited to the implementations shown herein, but is to be accorded the widest scope consistent with the novel features and principles disclosed herein.

Claims

1. An indoor farming module comprising: a compartment comprising a plurality of walls, and a ceiling defining a grow zone; a chassis comprising a plurality of vertical frame members and a plurality of horizontal frame members that form a plurality of tiers, each tier vertically spaced apart from an adjacent tier; a cart guiding system positioned on each tier; a plurality of carts positioned on each tier configured to move via the cart guiding system; at least one tray positioned in each of the plurality of carts, the tray configured to retain a plurality of plants; and a liquid circulation assembly configured to deliver irrigation liquid to the at least one tray in each of the plurality of carts and to receive drainage irrigation liquid from the at least one tray in each of the plurality of carts.
2. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein the liquid circulation assembly comprises a liquid supply conduit, a liquid return conduit, a liquid distribution tube assembly, and a drainage conduit.
3. The indoor farming module of claim 2, wherein the liquid supply conduit is coupled to one of the plurality of horizontal frame members forming each tier to deliver the irrigation liquid to the at least one tray.
4. The indoor farming module of claim 2, wherein the liquid return conduit is coupled to the liquid distribution tube assembly, the liquid distribution tube assembly movable from an engaged position in which the liquid distribution tube assembly is engaged with a corresponding tray to provide irrigation liquid to the corresponding tray, to a disengaged position in which the liquid distribution assembly is moved away from the corresponding cart to permit movement of the corresponding cart along the pair of guide rails.
5. The indoor farming module of claim 14, wherein the liquid distribution assembly is moved from the engaged position to the disengaged position by rotating the liquid return conduit.
6. The indoor farming module of claim 2, wherein the liquid distribution assembly comprises a liquid distribution nozzle and an aeration unit.
7. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein at least one horizontal frame member of the plurality of horizontal frame members supports a leaf guard.
8. The indoor farming module of claim 7, wherein the leaf guard is vertically positioned above the at least one tray to guide plant material from the plurality of plants into the tray or cart.
9. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein the at least one tray comprises a drain opening fluidly coupled to a liquid circulation assembly to allow drainage irrigation liquid to be collected.
10. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein the cart guiding system comprises a pair of guide rails positioned on each tier of the chassis.
11. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein each cart of the plurality of carts is coupled to an adjacent cart on each tier.
12. The indoor farming module of claim 10, wherein each cart of the plurality of carts comprises a cart coupler positioned on one end of the cart, the cart coupler connecting each cart to an adjacent

cart when lowered into position on the pair of guide rails.

13. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein each cart of the plurality of carts is moved along the pair of guide rails from being contacted by an adjacent cart.

14. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein the container compartment forms a rectangular box and the chassis is configured to be loaded with the plurality of carts from one end of the rectangular box.

15. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein each tier of the plurality of tiers is positioned horizontally in the grow zone parallel to an adjacent tier.

16. The indoor farming module of claim 10, wherein the pair of guide rails is one of a plurality of pairs of guide rails positioned on each tier to form a plurality of rows of carts on each tier.

17. The indoor farming module of claim 1, further comprising a tray handling system comprising an attachment configured to releasably connect to each cart of the plurality of carts to load and unload each cart from the chassis.

18. The indoor farming module of claim 17, wherein the attachment is configured to connect to a pair of cart couplers positioned on one end of each cart of the plurality of carts.

19. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein the at least one tray comprises a plurality of trays.

20. The indoor farming module of claim 1, wherein each cart of the plurality of carts is pushed through the grow zone by an adjacent cart.
