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AUTOMATED INDOOR GROWING APPARATUSES AND RELATED METHODS

Abstract

An indoor growing facility includes an enclosed structure defined by one or more first walls and a growing shell defining a grow zone positioned in the enclosed structure. The growing shell defined by one or more second walls. The indoor growing facility also includes at least one environmental control component positioned inside the enclosed structure and outside the growing shell.

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Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS [0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 18/048,086, filed on Oct. 20, 2022 that claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 63/270,002, filed on Oct. 20, 2021 and U.S. Provisional Application No. 63/301,813, filed on Jan. 21, 2022. The entire disclosures of each of the above applications are incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD

[0002] The present disclosure relates to automated indoor growing facilities, apparatuses and related methods.

BACKGROUND

[0003] This section provides background information related to the present disclosure which is not necessarily prior art.

[0004] 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. Indoor farming allows for faster, more controlled production, irrespective of season. Further, indoor farming is not vulnerable to other environmental variability such as pests, pollution, heavy metals, and pathogens. 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, indoor farming can help to address the significant challenges.

[0005] Current methods and systems for indoor farming, however, are relatively expensive to implement and do not efficiently utilize the available space within a room or enclosure for growing crops. For example, to implement an indoor farming system, an enclosure or container must be provided and thereafter configured for growing crops or plants in a controllable environment. Environmental parameters such as lighting, temperature, humidity, irrigation and airflow are controllable within an enclosure but existing systems and methods suffer from many drawbacks. One such drawback is that existing systems and methods require relatively expensive sensor and control systems. Additionally, existing systems require a large size and such space is inefficiently allocated. Furthermore, layouts of existing spaces can result in variations in airflow and other environmental conditions that result in reduced yields of usable crops. Still further, the resources used to produce the crops are inefficiently utilized resulting in higher costs and reduced yields. Therefore, there exists a need for improved systems, apparatuses and methods for indoor farming.

SUMMARY

[0006] This section provides a general summary of the disclosure, and is not a comprehensive disclosure of its full scope or all of its features.

[0007] The present disclosure provides apparatuses and methods for the indoor growing and automated growing of plants and crops. The apparatuses and methods of the present disclosure provide improvements in efficiency, yield, and cost over existing or traditional methods and apparatuses. The apparatuses and methods of the present disclosure may result in less resources that are required to yield mature plants and require less space, land, manpower while providing improved traceability, transparency and sustainability over existing or traditional apparatuses and methods.

[0008] The apparatuses and methods of the present disclosure may provide an indoor facility in which plants can be grown from seeds through mature plants that can be harvested and packaged for delivery to end users and customers. In some embodiments of the present disclosure, an indoor

growing facility is provided. The facility may include one or more zones for the maturation of a plant. The zones may be enclosed or separate chambers in an indoor growing facility. The zones may include a seeding zone, a germination zone, a propagation zone, a transplanting zone, a grow zone, a harvesting zone, a mixing zone and a packing zone. Each zone can be located in a defined area or chamber in the growing facility.

[0009] In some embodiments, the grow zone is an enclosed chamber positioned inside an indoor growing facility. The grow zone can be partitioned or separated into one or more growing pathways. Each pathway can be partitioned from adjacent pathways to allow each pathway to have predetermined environmental characteristics such as air flow, temperature, humidity, light exposure, irrigation and the like.

[0010] The grow zone may include various environment controls and related equipment that provide improvements over existing or traditional farming equipment and methods. In some embodiments, the environmental controls of the growing chamber may include dual purpose dry coolers that can operate in various modes of operation to provide heating of the growing chamber and cooling of the growing chamber. Such dual modes of operation may be provided when external conditions outside of the indoor farming facility have suitable environmental conditions such as temperatures that are greater than a predetermined temperature or temperatures that are less than a predetermined temperature.

[0011] In some embodiments, the indoor growing facility may include a combined growing and propagation zone. Such a combination can take advantage of the environmentally controlled grow zone to provide environmental conditions suitable for propagation. This can eliminate or reduce the need for redundant environment controls for separated growing and propagation areas.

[0012] In other embodiments, the grow zone can include air handling equipment that may include one or more plenum assemblies and one or more return assemblies. The plenum assemblies may include one or more air supply conduits that may separate or otherwise guide air flow from a single air source to the one or more growing pathways in the grow zone. The plenum assemblies can provide an air flow that has desirable characteristics for the growing plants. The return assemblies can be positioned in the grow zone to collect and return air from the grow zone to the air handling equipment. The combination of the plenum and return assemblies can provide a stable air flow such as a laminar flow.

[0013] The air handling equipment may also include one or more air characteristic controls that may be used to measure and/or modify the characteristics of the air flow provided to the growing chamber. The air handling equipment may operate to measure and control the volumetric flow rate, the temperature, the humidity and the like of the air flow. Heat pumps, heat exchangers, and heat exchange fluids can be used to modify the characteristics of the air flow as may be desirable for optimal growing conditions.

[0014] The equipment that operates to control the conditions of the grow zone can be packaged into modular assemblies. Such modular assemblies can be fabricated at a manufacturing location and then delivered to a building site of the indoor growing facility. In this manner, the indoor growing facility can be easily assembled. Such modular assemblies also allow a capacity of the indoor growing facility to be increased or to be scaled to various sizes as may be desirable or allowed by local building sites and/or geographic restrictions.

[0015] In some embodiments of the present disclosure, an indoor growing facility is provided. The indoor growing facility may include an enclosed structure defined by one or more first walls and a growing shell defining a grow zone positioned in the enclosed structure. The growing shell may be defined by one or more second walls. The indoor growing facility may also include at least one environmental control component positioned inside the enclosed structure and outside the growing shell.

[0016] In one aspect, the one or more first walls may separate an interior space of the indoor growing facility from an ambient external environment.

[0017] In another aspect, the indoor growing facility may also include a propagation zone positioned adjacent the grow zone in the growing shell.

[0018] In another aspect, the propagation zone may include a first growing structure that includes a plurality of rows for holding plants during a first stage of plant growth and the growing zone may include a second growing structure that includes a plurality of rows for holding plants during a second stage of plant growth. The first growing structure may be separated from the second growing structure by a transportation lane in the growing shell.

[0019] In another aspect, the indoor growing facility may also include a germination zone positioned proximate the propagation zone in the enclosed structure and outside the growing shell.

[0020] In another aspect, the indoor growing facility may also include a harvesting zone positioned proximate the grow zone in the enclosed structure and outside the growing shell.

[0021] In another aspect, the indoor growing facility may also include a transplanting zone configured to receive germinated plants from the germination zone and to provide transplanted plants to the propagation zone.

[0022] In another aspect, the at least one environmental control component may include an air handling unit and a heat pump.

[0023] In another aspect, the at least one environmental control component may be coupled to a dry cooler positioned outside the enclosed structure in an ambient environment.

[0024] In some embodiments of the present disclosure, a growing structure for use in an indoor growing facility is provided. The growing structure may include a plurality of vertical barriers and a plurality of horizontal barriers defining an array of grow pathways and a plenum wall positioned on a first side of the growing structure configured to supply an air flow into each of the grow pathways. The growing structure may also include a return wall positioned at a second side of the growing structure opposite to the first side configured to return air from the growing structure to the first side.

[0025] In one aspect, the growing structure may also include a loading lane positioned adjacent the array of grow pathways and a loading elevator positioned in the loading lane, wherein the loading elevator is configured to move in the loading lane to selectively load plants into one grow pathway of the array of grow pathways.

[0026] In another aspect, the loading lane may be positioned between the array of grow pathways and the return wall.

[0027] In another aspect, the growing structure may include an unloading lane positioned adjacent the array of grow pathways and an unloading elevator positioned in the unloading lane, wherein the unloading lane is positioned on a side of the array of grow pathways opposite to the loading lane.

[0028] In another aspect, the growing structure may include a propagation zone positioned between the loading zone and the return wall. The propagation zone may include a plurality of rows for supporting plants during a propagation stage of growth.

[0029] In another aspect, the growing structure may also include at least one air handler in communication with the plenum wall to provide the air flow.

[0030] In another aspect, the plenum wall may be coupled to a distribution assembly to separate air flow from an air handler into each grow pathway of the array of grow pathways.

[0031] In another aspect, the plenum wall may include a plurality of manifolds, each manifold of the plurality of manifolds positioned adjacent to one another to form the plenum wall.

[0032] In another aspect, each manifold of the plurality of manifolds may include a plurality of vents through which air flow exits each manifold. Each vent of the plurality of vents may be aligned with one grow pathway of the array of grow pathways.

[0033] In another aspect, each manifold of the plurality of manifolds may include a diverter positioned centrally between the plurality of vents. The diverter may have a sloped surface to guide airflow toward each vent of the plurality of vents.

[0034] In another aspect, the distribution assembly may include a plurality of channels coupled

between the air handler and the plenum wall to separate air flow, wherein a number of the plurality of channels corresponds to a number of the plurality of manifolds. Each channel of the plurality of channels may be coupled to one manifold of the plurality of manifolds.

[0035] In some embodiments of the present disclosure, an environmental control apparatus for use with an indoor growing facility is provided. The environmental control apparatus may include at least one air handler configured to supply an air flow to an enclosed grow zone and at least one heat pump coupled to the at least one air handler and to at least one dry cooler. The at least one heat pump may be operated in a first mode of operation in which a heat exchange fluid is cooled by the dry cooler and used to cool the air flow to remove moisture before the air handler supplies the air flow to the enclosed grow zone.

[0036] In one aspect, the at least one air handler and the at least one heat pump are positioned in an outer structure enclosing the grow zone. The outer structure may also separate the grow zone, the at least one air handler, and the at least one heat pump from an ambient external environment.

[0037] In another aspect, the at least one dry cooler is located outside the outer structure in the ambient external environment.

[0038] In another aspect, the at least one heat pump may be operated to heat the air flow after moisture is removed before the air flow is supplied to the grow zone.

[0039] In another aspect, the ventilation system may also include a cold fluid loop and a warm fluid loop each containing the heat exchange fluid. The cold fluid loop and the warm fluid loop fluidly may be coupled to the at least one air handler and to the at least one heat pump to cool and heat the air flow, respectively.

[0040] In another aspect, the at least one heat pump may be operated in a second mode of operation in which heat exchange fluid from the warm fluid loop is mixed with the heat exchange fluid in the cold fluid loop to maintain a temperature of the air flow above a dew point.

[0041] In another aspect, the air flow is not heated before the air flow is supplied to the grow zone in the second mode of operation.

[0042] In another aspect, the moisture that may be removed from the airflow in the first mode of operation is supplied to an irrigation system coupled to the grow zone.

[0043] In another aspect, the first mode of operation operates to remove moisture to maintain a predetermined humidity level in the grow zone.

[0044] In another aspect, the second mode of operation operates at a lower energy consumption than the first mode of operation.

[0045] In some embodiments of the present disclosure, an indoor growing facility is provided. The indoor growing facility may include a climate control apparatus configured to produce a plurality of streams of airflow. Each stream of airflow may have predetermined climate conditions. The indoor growing facility may also include a plurality of growing pathways wherein each growing pathway of the plurality of growing pathways is isolated from an adjacent growing pathway to allow introduction of a stream of airflow of the plurality of streams of airflow into each growing pathway.

[0046] In one aspect, each stream of airflow of the plurality of streams of airflow may have substantially similar climate conditions.

[0047] In another aspect, the predetermined climate conditions comprise air speed, temperature, and humidity.

[0048] In another aspect, the climate control apparatus may include an air handler coupled to a distribution assembly. The distribution assembly may include a plurality of channels to separate and divide an initial airflow into the plurality of streams of airflow.

[0049] In another aspect, the distribution assembly may include a plurality of manifolds coupled to the plurality of channels. Each manifold of the plurality of manifolds may include at least one vent configured to introduce one stream of airflow to one growing pathway.

[0050] In another aspect, the climate control apparatus may include a return system coupled to the

air handler that is configured to return the plurality of streams of airflow from each of the growing pathways to the air handler.

[0051] In another aspect, the airflow may be modified after the airflow is returned from the plurality of growing pathways to have the predetermined climate conditions before the airflow is re-introduced into the plurality of growing pathways.

[0052] In another aspect, each stream of airflow of the plurality of streams of airflow is a laminar flow.

[0053] In another aspect, the plurality of growing pathways are defined by a plurality of vertical barriers and a plurality of horizontal barriers.

[0054] In another aspect, the climate control apparatus is separated from the plurality of growing pathways by an enclosure.

[0055] Further areas of applicability will become apparent from the description provided herein. The description and specific examples in this summary are intended for purposes of illustration only and are not intended to limit the scope of the present disclosure.

Description

DRAWINGS

[0056] The drawings described herein are for illustrative purposes only of selected embodiments and not all possible implementations, and are not intended to limit the scope of the present disclosure.

[0057] FIG. 1 is an isometric view of an example indoor growing facility in accordance with the present disclosure.

[0058] FIG. 2 is a flow chart showing an example method of growing plants in accordance with the present disclosure.

[0059] FIG. 3 is a plan view of an example floor layout for an example indoor growing facility of the present disclosure.

[0060] FIG. 4 is an enlarged plan view of a portion of the floor layout of FIG. 3.

[0061] FIG. 5 is an isometric view of the example indoor growing facility with the floor layout of FIG. 3.

[0062] FIG. 6 is an isometric view of the example indoor growing facility of FIG. 5 shown with portions of the walls and roof as transparent to illustrate the interior components and layout of the facility.

[0063] FIG. 7 is an isometric illustration of an example tray used during a germination and/or propagation stages of the growing processes of the present disclosure.

[0064] FIG. 8 is an isometric illustration of an example float used during a growing stage of the growing processes of the present disclosure.

[0065] FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional illustration of a float and bench assembly used during the growing stage of the growing processes of the present disclosure.

[0066] FIG. 10 is an illustration of portions of an example indoor growing facility of the present disclosure.

[0067] FIG. 11 is an illustration of further portions of an example indoor growing facility of the present disclosure.

[0068] FIG. 12 is a side view illustration of an example structure of a grow zone of an indoor growing facility of the present disclosure.

[0069] FIG. 13 is a top view illustration of one row in a grow zone structure of an indoor growing facility of the present disclosure.

[0070] FIG. 14A is a top view of an example grow zone structure showing example air handling paths.

[0071] FIG. **14B** is a side view of the example grow zone structure of FIG. **14A** showing multiple rows and example air handling paths.

[0072] FIG. **14C** is a side sectional view along cut plane A-A indicated on FIG. **14B**.

[0073] FIG. **15** is a side view of an example indoor growing facility of the present disclosure showing aspects of the grow zone structure, propagation zone structure and air handling paths.

[0074] FIG. **16** is an isometric view of an example grow zone structure and air handling assembly.

[0075] FIG. **17A** is a schematic illustration showing an example grow room and environmental controls in a standard operating mode.

[0076] FIG. **17B** is a schematic illustration showing the example grow room and environmental controls of FIG. **17A** in a free cooling mode.

[0077] FIG. **18** is a side view of an example grow zone showing aspects of an air handling system.

[0078] FIG. **19** is an end view of example air handling units and air supply plenums for a grow zone of the present disclosure.

[0079] FIG. **20** is an end view of one of the air handling units and air supply plenums of FIG. **19**.

[0080] FIG. **21** is an end view of an entry side of an example air supply plenum.

[0081] FIG. **22** is a side sectional view of the air supply plenum of FIG. **21**.

[0082] FIG. **23** is an end view of an exit side of the air supply plenum of FIG. **21**.

[0083] FIG. **24** is an end view an example diverter included in the air supply plenum of FIGS. **21-23**.

[0084] FIG. **25** is a schematic illustration of an environmental control apparatus operating in a first mode of operation to deliver conditioned air flow to a grow room.

[0085] FIG. **26** is a schematic illustration of the environmental control apparatus of FIG. **25** operating in a second mode of operation to deliver conditioned air flow to the grow room.

[0086] FIG. **27** is schematic illustration of an example environmental control apparatus used to deliver conditioned air flow to a grow room.

[0087] FIG. **28** is a cross-sectional illustration showing aspects of the grow zone structure including lighting and irrigation elements.

[0088] FIG. **29** is an isometric illustration of a float cleaning assembly in accordance with the present disclosure.

[0089] FIG. **30** is a perspective illustration of an example rail system in accordance with some embodiments of the present disclosure.

[0090] FIG. **31** is a perspective illustration of an example rail system supporting benches containing plants in accordance with some embodiments of the present disclosure.

[0091] FIG. **32** is an illustration of an example powered roller in accordance with some embodiments of the present disclosure.

[0092] FIG. **33** is an illustration of an example walkway positioned adjacent an example rail system in accordance with some embodiments of the present disclosure.

[0093] Corresponding reference numerals indicate corresponding parts throughout the several views of the drawings.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0094] Example embodiments will now be described more fully with reference to the accompanying drawings. For purposes of the description hereinafter, it is to be understood that the embodiments described below may assume alternative variations and embodiments. It is also to be understood that the specific articles, compositions, and/or processes described herein are exemplary and should not be considered as limiting. In the description, relative terms such as “lower,” “upper,” “horizontal,” “vertical,” “above,” “below,” “up,” “down,” “top” and “bottom” as well as derivative thereof (e.g., “horizontally,” “downwardly,” “upwardly,” etc.) should be construed to refer to the orientation as then described or as shown in the drawing under discussion. These relative terms are for convenience of description and do not require that the apparatus be constructed or operated in a particular orientation. Terms concerning attachments, coupling and the

like, such as “connected” and “interconnected,” refer to a relationship wherein structures are secured or attached to one another either directly or indirectly through intervening structures, as well as both movable or rigid attachments or relationships, unless expressly described otherwise. [0095] Although the terms first, second, third, etc. may be used herein to describe various elements, components, regions, layers and/or sections, these elements, components, regions, layers and/or sections should not be limited by these terms. These terms may be only used to distinguish one element, component, region, layer or section from another region, layer or section. Terms such as “first,” “second,” and other numerical terms when used herein do not imply a sequence or order unless clearly indicated by the context. Thus, a first element, component, region, layer or section discussed below could be termed a second element, component, region, layer or section without departing from the teachings of the example embodiments.

[0096] In the present disclosure the singular forms “a,” “an,” and “the” include the plural reference, and reference to a particular numerical value includes at least that particular value, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise. When values are expressed as approximations, by use of the antecedent “about,” it will be understood that the particular value forms another embodiment. As used herein, “about X” (where X is a numerical value) preferably refers to $\pm 10\%$ of the recited value, inclusive. For example, the phrase “about 8” preferably refers to a value of 7.2 to 8.8, inclusive. Where present, all ranges are inclusive and combinable. For example, when a range of “1 to 5” is recited, the recited range should be construed as including ranges “1 to 4”, “1 to 3”, “1-2”, “1-2 & 4-5”, “1-3 & 5”, “2-5”, and the like. In addition, when a list of alternatives is positively provided, such listing can be interpreted to mean that any of the alternatives may be excluded, e.g., by a negative limitation in the claims. For example, when a range of “1 to 5” is recited, the recited range may be construed as including situations whereby any of 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 are negatively excluded; thus, a recitation of “1 to 5” may be construed as “1 and 3-5, but not 2”, or simply “wherein 2 is not included.” It is intended that any component, element, attribute, or step that is positively recited herein may be explicitly excluded in the claims, whether such components, elements, attributes, or steps are listed as alternatives or whether they are recited in isolation.

[0097] The present disclosure is directed to indoor growing facilities, growing apparatuses and related methods. The facilities, apparatuses and methods of the present disclosure are improvements over existing or traditional growing and farming equipment and processes. As shown in FIG. 1, an example indoor growing facility **100** is shown. The growing facility **100** can be located on a suitable building site **102**. The building site can be located in various suitable geographic locations and can have various sizes. The example facility **100** can include a footprint that includes an enclosed building that can include floor space to allow for finished plant products to be grown to maturity from seeds and packaged for delivery to a customer. As shown, the facility can include an enclosed structure **104** with a loading dock **106**.

[0098] Raw materials such as seeds, growing medium, fertilizers and the like can be delivered to the loading dock **106**. The entire growing process can be accomplished in the structure **104**. When mature plants are grown, the plants can be harvested and packaged for delivery to a customer. The packaged plant goods can be delivered from the same loading dock **106** at which the raw materials are received. The growing process can be carefully monitored and controlled to allow the plants to be grown to maturity using less resources than existing or traditional farming and growing methods. In addition, the plants can be grown in less time than traditional farming techniques. Since the plants and their growing conditions are known and recorded from seed to maturity, the quality and characteristics of the plants are known and can be traced back to a lot of seed.

[0099] The building site **102** may include other features or characteristics. For example, the building site **102** may include a reservoir **108**. The reservoir **108** can be used to collect and/or hold rainwater that can be used or incorporated into the growing process after suitable quality control is performed such as filtration and/or removal of contaminants.

[0100] As can be appreciated, the growing facility **100** can be a large facility. The principles and

teachings of the present disclosure can be used in various facilities having various sizes. The various apparatuses, structures and methods described herein can be modified to be located in various types of growing facilities having various sizes.

[0101] Turning now to FIG. 2, an example growing process **200** is shown. The growing process **200** may be used in the growing facility **100**. As previously described, the growing facility **100** is sized and arranged to allow efficient performance of the process **200** from seeding **202** to packing **216**. It should be appreciated, however, that some facilities may be arranged or sized to allow performance of one or more of the steps of the process **200**.

[0102] The process **200** begins at step **202**. At step **202**, seeding occurs. At seeding, seeds of a predetermined plant variety are placed in a suitable growing medium. In one example, the seeds are placed in a suitable prepackaged growing medium. One such prepackaged growing medium tray is the Quick Plug. Such a medium provides for the healthy germination and growing of the plant variety. Growing medium can also be prepared at the facility according to a specified recipe(s) and arranged on a tray at specific spaced distances. The plant medium may be placed in one or more openings in a tray that can hold one or more seeds and/or plants. After the plant medium is placed, one or more seeds can be deposited on or in the medium. There are various known techniques for depositing seeds on a medium or into the medium at a predetermined depth beneath the surface.

[0103] The process **200** then moves to step **204**. At step **204**, germination occurs. At germination, the seeds and growing medium are placed in an environment having predetermined germination conditions. Germination can occur in two to three days for example. For certain plant varieties, germination may take other periods of time. At germination, the seed husk breaks open and the plant begins to grow. Once the seed husk breaks open, the process moves to step **206**. In the indoor growing facility **100**, a germination chamber can be provided in which the seeds are held in predetermined conditions.

[0104] At step **206**, propagation occurs. Propagation refers to the early stage of plant development. The plants during this early stage of growing may need somewhat different environmental conditions than are required during later growing stages. In one example, the trays of germinated seeds can be loaded into benches and moved from the germination chamber to a propagation chamber. As will be described, the propagation chamber may be combined with a grow zone in which the plants are grown to maturity. In other examples, the propagation chamber can be separate from the grow zone. Once in the propagation chamber, the plants are allowed to grow until the plants have predetermined characteristics that make the plants suitable for growing to maturity. In some examples, the stage of propagation can take about ten to twelve days. In other examples and for other plant varieties, the stage of propagation can take other lengths of time.

[0105] At step **208**, transplanting occurs. The step of transplanting **208** can include a process of moving the plants from a tray into a float. This process generally includes moving the plants from a dense arrangement of plants to an arrangement in which the plants are spaced further apart from one another. During germination and propagation, the seedlings and plants can be positioned closer together because the plants are small enough such that they do not interfere with one another or inhibit the growth of neighboring plants. Once the plants reach a certain size (at the conclusion of propagation **206**, for example) the plants need to be moved further apart to allow the plant to grow to reach a suitable mature size. Thus, the propagated plants are transplanted to a growing container that has suitable spacing to allow the plants to reach a mature size. In order to transplant the plants, the trays can be removed from the propagation chamber. The plants and growing medium can be removed from the propagation trays and re-inserted or re-deposited into a float. The float can have suitable spacing for the growing of the plants.

[0106] The process **200** can continue to step **210**. At step **210**, the plants can be grown. The growing step **210** can include the growing of the plants to a mature size at which time the mature plants are ready for harvesting. During step **210**, the plants can be moved into a grow zone, as will be further described, in which the environmental conditions can be controlled and monitored to

efficiently grow the plants to a mature size. The grow zone can have suitable structures and elements to provide lighting, air flow, irrigation, nutrients, and the like to be provided. The plants can be moved in their floats and positioned into benches. The float and bench assemblies can then be moved into the grow zone using automatic conveyance equipment in some examples. The plants in their floats can be transported and moved through the grow zone. In the grow zone, the plants can be subjected to various desirable conditions that may be desirable according to the particular stage of growing or development. Once fully mature, the plants can be removed from the grow zone. In alternative embodiments, the process can proceed without transplanting. In such alternative embodiments, the process moves directly from the propagation step **206** to the growing step **210**, eliminating the transplanting step **208**. A different tray/growing float design may be preferred in such alternative embodiments.

[0107] Once the plants have grown to maturity, the process can move to step **212**. At step **212**, harvesting occurs. At harvesting **212**, the plants are removed from the growing medium and/or from the growing floats. The desirable parts of the plants are collected for packaging and the undesirable parts can be disposed of, composted or otherwise recycled. In some examples, the plants can be harvested using automatic cutting, shearing, scraping or collecting equipment. While not shown, the growing containers, floats, trays, and/or benches can be cleaned and reused to grow new plants using the same process. Some plants or crops, such as berries and fruits, can be placed back into the grow zone for second or subsequent grow cycles as the same plant can produce multiple harvests.

[0108] At step **214**, mixing may occur. At mixing, various types of plants can be mixed together. For example, a plant product may include a predetermined mixture of different plant varieties for a particular salad or greens mix. At step **214**, the various mature and harvested plants can be mixed together into the predetermined mixes.

[0109] At step **216**, packaging may occur. The plant products, either individually or in mixtures as previously described, can be combined into containers, bags, boxes or other receptacles. Once the plant products are packaged, the plant products can be shipped or delivered to customers or other plant processing facilities.

[0110] As can be appreciated, the process **200** can be continuously and automatically performed. In some examples, the process **200** is continuously performed using the facility **100** so that plants in various stages of development are moving through the various zones and chambers from seeding **202** to packing **216**. In this manner, the indoor farming facility **100** can continuously produce plant products rather than being limited to specific growing seasons or by variations in weather or other external environmental conditions. Furthermore, since the process is performed indoors, the process can be performed in any geographic location and in closer proximity to/within urban areas or in areas that otherwise would not support farming of many plant varieties.

[0111] As shown in FIG. 3, an example layout of an indoor growing facility **300** is shown. The layout can be a plan view of the indoor growing facility **100** shown in FIG. 1. The layout illustrates the footprint of various rooms, chambers or zones in the indoor growing facility. The vertical farm **300** will be explained with reference to the growing process **200** previously described. It should be appreciated, however, that other layouts and other facilities can also be used.

[0112] The vertical farm **300** can be enclosed within one or more buildings and can include an external wall **304** that can be constructed to enclose the various zones of the indoor growing facility. The vertical farm **300** may include a seeding zone **306**. The seeding zone **306** can be configured as an enclosed room in which the seeding step **202** can be performed. The germination zone **308** can be positioned adjacent or proximate to the seeding zone **306**. The germination zone **308** can be an enclosed, environmentally controlled room in which the germination step **204** can be performed.

[0113] The vertical farm **300** may also include a propagation loading zone **310**. The propagation loading zone **310** may include one or more conveyance assemblies such as conveyors, racks, rail

systems or the like. The trays of plants from the germination zone **308** can be moved into or onto the propagation loading zone **310**. The trays can then be moved from the propagation loading zone **310** into the propagation zone **312**. This process can be performed automatically using suitable conveyance devices such as robots, conveyors, pneumatics, and the like. The propagation zone **312** can be combined as part of the enclosure that makes up the grow zone **318**. Thus, the propagation zone **312** can be environmentally controlled to have predetermined propagation climate conditions such as humidity, air flow, temperature, lighting, irrigation and the like.

[0114] The vertical farm **300** may also include a transplanting zone **314**. The transplanting zone **314** may be located adjacent or proximate to the propagation loading zone **310**. In this manner, the movement of the plants from the propagation zone **312** to the transplanting zone **314** is simple and does not require excessive movement of the propagated plants. The step **208** of transplanting can occur in the transplanting zone **314**. The plants can be transplanted from a tray to a float in the transplanting zone **314**. The transplanting zone **314** may include an automatic transplanting apparatus that can remove plants from the propagation trays and deposit the plants in the growing floats. An example propagation tray **700** and an example growing float **800** are shown in FIG. 7 and FIG. 8, respectively. The growing tray can have increased spacing and/or a decreased density of plants.

[0115] As stated above, in alternative embodiments, the vertical farm **300** can be designed without a transplanting zone **314** or transplanting equipment. In such embodiments, plants can move directly from the propagation zone **312** to the growing zone **318**.

[0116] The vertical farm **300** can also include a growing loading zone **316**. The growing loading zone is a region of the layout of the growing facility in which the floats of plants can be inserted or loaded into the grow zone **318**. The growing loading zone **316** can include conveyors, racks, rail systems, ramps, robots, automated moving systems, or other conveyance devices to move the floats into the grow zone **318**. The loading equipment can be automatically controlled to deliver floats and/or plants into the grow zone in a predetermined manner so that the plants are positioned in a desired number and/or sequence in the grow zone **318**. The floats that include the propagated plants may be installed or inserted into benches that can hold multiple floats. The benches can also be conveyed moved or otherwise loaded in the growing loading zone **316** into the grow zone **318**. The growing loading zone **316** can be positioned adjacent to the transplanting zone **314** and adjacent to the grow zone **318**.

[0117] The grow zone **318** can be positioned to accept the plants that may be positioned in the floats and/or benches. The grow zone **318** is a large enclosure that allows the growing plants to be subjected to environmentally controlled conditions. The controlled environment can improve the growth rate and health of the plants. The controlled climate conditions can also use less resources than traditional farming methods. The grow zone **318** can include a growing structure that includes various elements, as will be described further below, to create separate growing pathways or chambers within the grow zone **318** that can further optimize and improve the environmental characteristics or specified climate conditions such as light, humidity, air flow, temperature, irrigation and the like. The grow zone **318** can be constructed of steel and wrapped in insulated panels to maintain the climate within the grow chamber. The insulating panels may be 4-inch insulated panels in one example.

[0118] The plants in the floats that are loaded into the grow zone **318** may move within the grow zone **318** as they mature. In the example shown, the plants may move toward the growing unloading zone **320** as they mature. After the plants are fully matured, the plants can be automatically unloaded from the grow zone **318**. The growing unloading zone **320** can include conveyors, racks, rail systems, elevators, robots, and the like that can unload the floats and/or benches of plants from the grow zone **318**.

[0119] The unloaded plants can move from the growing unloading zone **320** to the harvesting zone **322**. The harvesting step **212** of the process **200** previously described can be performed in the

harvesting zone **322**. For example, the plants can be removed from the floats and the desirable portions of the plants that are used to produce plant products can be cut, trimmed, scraped or otherwise separated from the undesirable portion. The desirable portions of the plants are then collected, while the undesirable parts of the plants and/or the growing medium can be deposited, composted, or otherwise recycled. The harvesting zone **322** may include, for example, a float scraping assembly that can be used to remove the plants from the floats.

[0120] The vertical farm **300** may also include a work-in-process zone **332**. The work-in-process zone **332** can be used for various tasks involving the collected plant material after harvesting. The work-in-process zone **332** can be used, for example, to perform the mixing step **214** previously described. In other examples, the work-in-process zone **332** can be used to perform other tasks. The vertical farm **300** may also include a product cooling area, which can be an active cooling area for cooling the harvested crops prior to packaging. The active cooling area may employ a vacuum cooling process.

[0121] The vertical farm may also include the packing zone **334**. The packing zone **334** may include various workstations and/or packing equipment that can be used to perform the packing step **216**. In various examples, the packing zone **334** can include equipment for mixing, weighing, sorting, detecting product characteristics, bagging, boxing, sealing, cooling or making atmospheric modification as may be desired to package, preserve and prepare the plant products for shipment to customers or other processors.

[0122] The vertical farm **300** may include other systems or equipment that may serve or provide inputs to the other zones in the vertical farm **300**. As further shown, the vertical farm **300** may include an air handler zone **324**. The air handler zone **324** is positioned along one side of the grow zone **318** and may include one or more air handling units or other equipment that provides air flow to the grow zone. The air handler zone **324** may be positioned inside the outer structure of the vertical farm **300** or outside the grow zone **318**.

[0123] The vertical farm **300** may also include one or more irrigation systems to provide water having predetermined characteristics to the various zones. The vertical farm **300** may include a first irrigation system **326** and a second irrigation system **328** that can serve one or more portions of the grow zone **318**. The first irrigation system **326** and the second irrigation system **328** can include filtration systems, sanitation systems, nutrient additive systems, other purification systems, and recycling systems to provide water to the plants in the grow zone **318**. The vertical farm **300** may also include a propagation irrigation system **330** that can include similar systems to that of the first irrigation system **326** and the second irrigation system **328** but can operate to deliver water and/or nutrients to the propagation zone **312**. The vertical farm **300** may also include a fresh water system **340** that can operate to process, filter and/or purify fresh water that may need to be added into the closed irrigation systems, such as first irrigation system **326**, second irrigation system **328** and/or propagation system **330**.

[0124] As further shown, the vertical farm **300** may also include washing zone **342**. The washing zone **342** may include various pieces of equipment that can be used to wash the various pieces of equipment used in the growing process. Such elements that may need washing include the trays, floats or benches used during propagation or growing or other growing equipment, and removable components of the harvesting equipment.

[0125] Referring now to FIG. 5, an illustration of the indoor growing facility **500** is shown. The example shown may have a similar layout the vertical farm **300** shown in FIGS. 3 and 4. In the figure, a portion of the roof of the facility **500** is removed to illustrate the location of the grow zone **318** inside the outer building **502**. The grow zone **318** comprises a growing shell or growing module **504**, which is located within and enclosed by outer building **502**. The climate control systems and equipment of vertical farm **300** can be located inside a protected environment within outer building **502**, but outside the grow zone **318**. In other methods and farming structures, the environmental control equipment is often located inside the grow zone. Locating the climate

control equipment within the grow zone can make the environmental conditions of the grow zone more difficult to control and can introduce contaminants into the grow zone. The shell-inside-a-shell arrangement of the present disclosure is an improvement over traditional farming and/or growing arrangements.

[0126] Referring now to FIG. 6, an illustration of the growing facility **500** of FIG. 5 is shown with portions of the wall and roof as transparent to illustrate the interior components and layout of the farming facility. As can be seen, the grow zone **318** occupies the largest portion of the facility **500** and is located within a larger enclosed structure **502**. It is understood however, that the facility could have multiple grow zone modules within the enclosed structure **502** and that the grow zone **318** does not need to occupy the largest footprint in the facility. The climate control equipment, and other systems that communicate with the grow zone **318** are located within the enclosed structure **502**.

[0127] Turning now to FIG. 7, an example propagation tray **700** is shown. The tray **700** can include multiple openings **702** arranged with a predetermined spacing $d1$ in a longitudinal direction along the tray **700**. The openings **702** can also be spaced apart at a distance $d2$ in a transverse direction across the tray **700**. The openings **702** are used to retain the growing medium for the plant. Any suitable distances $d1$ and $d2$ can be used. Since the tray **700** is used during seeding, germination, and propagation, the distances $d1$ and $d2$ can be relatively small since the plants **704** that are growing during these stages of development are small. In some examples, the openings **702** can be spaced apart such that distances $d1$ and $d2$ are only a few millimeters. In other examples, the opening are spaced having distances $d1$ and $d2$ in a range of about 1 to 2 inches. In other examples, other spacing can be used. The tray **700** can be formed of any suitable material such as a suitable polymer, composite or other plastic. In other examples, other materials can be used.

[0128] FIG. 8 shows an example float **800** that can be used to retain the plants **704** during the growing stage of development after propagation. The plants **704** can be retained in the floats **800** until the plants **704** reach maturity and are harvested. As can be seen, the plants **704** are arranged in openings **802** in the floats **800** in less dense arrangement than that in the trays **700**. Plants, including the growing media and root system, can be transplanted from tray **700** into the openings **802** of floats **800**. Accordingly, openings **802** should be sized to receive the plants, including the growing media and root system removed from tray **700** after the propagation stage.

[0129] The plants **704** become much larger during the growing stage of development and thus must be positioned further apart from each to allow each plant **704** to grow to a mature size. The openings **802** can be arranged on the float **800** having a distance $d3$ from each other along the longitudinal direction and having a distance $d4$ from each along the transverse direction across the float **800**. The distances $d3$ and $d4$ can be any suitable distance. In some examples the distances $d3$ and $d4$ are in a range of about 1 inch to 3 inches. In some examples, the distances $d3$ and $d4$ are in a range of about 8 inches to 16 inches. In other examples, other spacing or distances can be used.

[0130] FIGS. 7 and 8 illustrate one example of a tray and float system that includes a transplantation process, but other arrangement of trays and floats can be used in the facility. For example, the shape of the openings can be varied to accommodate different growing media or root systems. The location and arrangement of the openings can be varied. The thickness or height of the float can be varied to a desired specification in relation to the growth characteristics of the plant and its root system. The number of openings can be varied. Also, the float can be designed with features such as spacers that are used to position the float in a desired position above the base of the bench.

[0131] In other examples, a single tray or float can be used for the entire growth cycle of the plant from seeding to harvest. Such a float design would not require transplanting after propagation. Such a float should have a design to receive the growing media in a manner that accommodates the plant growth throughout its growth cycle until harvest.

[0132] FIG. 9 shows an example bench assembly **900** that includes a float **800** retained in a bench

902. After the plants **704** exit propagation, the plants **704** are transplanted from the tray **700** into the floats **800**. During such transplanting, the plants **704** and the growing medium **904** are removed from the trays **700** and are re-inserted into the openings **802** of the float **800**. The openings **702** of the trays **700** and the opening **802** of the floats **800** can have the same outer size or outer diameter. In this manner, the plants **704** and the growing medium **904** can be re-inserted into the floats **800** in the less dense arrangement as previously described.

[0133] As further shown, the float **800** can be inserted into a bench **902**. The bench may be a rectangular box that can be sized so that one or more floats **800** fit inside the internal volume defined by the walls of the bench **902**. The float **800** may be positioned so that a lower surface **912** of the float **800** is positioned above a base **914** of the bench **902**. This arrangement defines a cavity **908** between the lower surface **912** and the base **914**. To create cavity **908**, the float **800** can be designed to include legs, spacers, or other features to position the lower surface **912** of the float **800** above the base **914** of the bench. In other examples, one or more protrusions, supports, ledges, or other surface can be added to the walls of the bench **902** to position the lower surface **912** of the float **800** spaced apart from the base **914** of the bench **902**. The roots **906** of the plants **704** can extend from the float **800** into the cavity **908**. In this arrangement, the roots **906** can grow to a suitable size to support a mature plant despite the growing medium **904** being relatively small for a mature plant. This arrangement can further support an ebb and flood method of irrigating the plants **704**.

[0134] In such an ebb and flood method of irrigation, water is deposited into the bench **902**. The water fills the bench **902** including the cavity **908**. The bench **902** also includes a drain **910** positioned in the base **914**. The water drains from the cavity **908** through the drain **910**. The drain **910** can be suitably sized so that the water drains from the cavity **908** in a predetermined amount of time. The amount of time can be in a range of about 3 minutes to about 10 minutes. In another example, the predetermined amount of time to drain is about 5 minutes. The water that is deposited into the bench **902** to fill the cavity **908** can contain desirable nutrients and other additives that provide the necessary nutrition to the plants **704** for proper development and growth. The roots **906** can absorb or otherwise retain moisture and nutrients from the water to support growth and development of the plants **704**.

[0135] Referring now to FIG. **10**, an illustration of portions of a growing facility **1000** are shown. In this example, a germination zone **308** such as a germination room is positioned adjacent to the propagation loading zone **310**. The propagation loading zone **310** can include one or more racks (not shown) that include wheels or rollers to allow the trays **700** to easily moved from the germination room and inserted into the propagation zone **312**. As further shown, the transplanting zone **314** can include a transplanting apparatus **1002** that can automatically transfer the plants **704** from the trays **700** to the floats **800**. The floats can then be positioned inside the benches **902** and moved into the grow zone **318** in the growing loading zone **316**. The benches can be placed near the growing loading zone **316** by an automated overhead crane **1004** after washing and then loaded with floats **800**. The floats and benches can be moved, for example, along the rail system into the growing loading zone **316**. In other examples, the crane **1004** can also be used in the growing unloading zone **320** to move the floats **800** and/or benches **902** in the growing unloading zone **320**.

[0136] As shown in FIG. **30**, the growing facility can include rail system **3000** that is used to transport, convey or otherwise move the plants in the indoor growing facility **1100**. The rail system **3000** can be used in the various zones previously described. The rail system **3000** can be used, for example, in the propagation loading zone **310**, the propagation zone **312**, the transplanting zone **314**, the growing loading zone **316**, the grow zone **318**, the growing unloading zone **320** and the harvesting zone **322**. The rail system **3000** can include two elongated rail members **3002** that can extend along a longitudinal direction of the rail system **3000**. The rail members **3002** are spaced apart at a suitable lateral width so that a tray, float, or bench can be supported between or on the rail members **3002**. The rail members **3002** can be secured at the desired lateral width by one or more

lateral members **3008**. The rail members **3002** and the lateral members can be made of a suitable aluminum, steel or other alloy and can have a square, rectangular, round or other cross-sectional shape to provide suitable rigidity and strength to support the trays, float and/or benches that contain the plants at various stages of development.

[0137] The rail system **3000** may also include one or more wheels **3004** that can be periodically positioned on the rail members **3002**. The wheels **3004** can allow the trays, floats and/or benches to be easily moved along the length of the rail system **3000**. In other examples, the rail system **3000** can include rollers that are positioned between the rail members **3002** to provide similar functionality. In still other examples, the trays, floats and/or benches can include wheels or rollers that are configured to roll on the rail members **3002**. In still other examples, both the rail members **3002** and the trays, floats, and/or benches include wheels or rollers.

[0138] As shown in FIG. **31**, a rail system **3100** may be similarly configured to the rail system **3000** previously described. The rail system **3100** is configured to support a bench **3102** that includes plants **3104**. As can be appreciated, a width of the bench **3102** can be configured to be similar in size to the lateral width of the rail system **3100**.

[0139] An example of an automated conveyance system is shown in FIG. **32**, where a powered roller **3204** and motor assembly is illustrated. The powered roller **3204** can be positioned on one or both of the rail members **3002**. In the example shown, the powered roller **3204** is connected to rail member **3202**. The powered roller **3204** is coupled to a motor **3210** that can be a suitable servo-motor, stepper motor, electric motor or the like. The motor **3210** can turn the powered roller **3204**. When a tray, float, and/or bench is positioned on the rail system, it rests on or contacts the powered roller **3204**. Thus, when the motor **3210** rotates the powered roller **3204**, the tray, float and/or bench is moved along the rail system in a direction of the rail member **3202**. The rail system may also include one or more wheels **3206**. The wheels **3206** can be free-spinning and provided to support the tray, float, and/or bench. With this configuration, a powered roller **3204** is only need at predetermined positions along the rail member **3202**. In one example, a powered roller **3204** can be provided so that only one powered roller **3204** contacts a particular tray, float or bench at one time.

[0140] The motor **3210** can be coupled to controller or other computing device that can control the powered roller **3204** and cause movement of the trays, floats, and/or benches at desired times and/or at predetermined schedules or events. Accordingly, the movement of the benches can be automated and controlled remotely.

[0141] FIG. **11** illustrates another view of the indoor growing facility **1100** from a different angle from that shown in FIG. **10**. In this view, the growing unloading zone **320** is shown to include one or more rail systems with rollers that can be used to move the floats **800** and/or the benches **902**. In the background, the growing loading zone **316** and the propagation loading zone **310** can be seen. As further shown, a harvesting apparatus **1104** can be positioned in the harvesting zone **322**. The grow zone module or structure **318** can be enclosed in the building **1106**. The grow zone **318**, which can be a modularized structure can be separated from the exterior walls of the building **1106**. As will be further described, the space **1102** shown can include the air handling equipment and other climate control elements that can provide air flow to the grow zone **318** with predetermined characteristics to achieve a desired climate within the grow zone.

[0142] As previously described, each grow zone module **318** can include an internal design that separates the grow zone module **318** into one or more growing pathways. FIG. **12** illustrates an example arrangement of the growing structure inside a grow zone module **318**. While the exact arrangement such as the number of rows or pathways may vary, the relative arrangement of the grow zone module, the propagation zone and other aspects as hereinafter described provide improved performance and growing conditions over that of other growing structures. The grow zone module **318** can be a modularized structure that can be sized to the specific needs of the indoor growing facility. Moreover, in some examples, it is preferred to have multiple grow zone modules **318** in a single indoor growing facility. Grow zone modules **318** can vary in size,

footprint, number of layers and number of rows within each layer.

[0143] FIG. 12 illustrates a plan view of an example growing structure **1200** of a grow zone module **318**. In the example shown, the growing structure **1200** may include one or more growing rows **1202**. Any number of rows **1202a**, **1202b**, to **1202n** may be used. In this example, the growing structure **1200** includes ten growing rows **1202**. The rows **1202** can be similarly sized and can be sized so that the width of the row (i.e., measured up and down as shown in FIG. 12) allows one float **800** or one bench assembly **900** to be positioned in a row. Multiple bench assemblies **902** can then be inserted into each row and abut one another along the longitudinal direction of the row **1202**.

[0144] Such an arrangement is shown in FIG. 13. As shown, a single row **1202** includes ten bench assemblies **902** positioned side by side in the row. In other examples, the row **1202** can be sized to allow for more than ten bench assemblies or to support less than ten assemblies.

[0145] Referring back to FIG. 12, the growing structure **1200** also includes a loading transportation lane **1204** and an unloading transportation lane **1206**. The loading transportation lane is an area of the growing structure **1200** that allows bench assemblies **902** that are loaded into the grow zone **318** to be positioned in a row as may be desired according to a predetermined growing schedule. For example, each row **1202** may include a different plant variety or may be on a different growing schedule than an adjacent row or pathway. As such, a newly propagated and transplanted bench assembly **902** of plants **704** may need to be inserted into the growing structure **1200** in a desired row. The loading transportation lane **1204** allows the bench assembly to be moved to the desired row using a loading elevator **1208** and other conveyance equipment such as rollers, conveyors, robots or the like. In one example, the bench assembly **902** can be pushed into a desired row **1202** by a pusher **1302** (FIG. 13). The pusher **1302** can be a pneumatic, electrical, hydraulic or mechanically operated bar or other bumper that extend toward the first position in the row **1202** to move the bench assembly **902** from the loading transportation lane **1204** and into the first position. As the bench assembly **902** is pushed or otherwise moved into the first position, the bench assemblies **902** push against one another to advance the bench assemblies along the row **1202** toward the unloading transportation lane **1206**. Thus, as one bench assembly is moved into the first position, the bench assembly **902** previously in the tenth position is pushed into the unloading transportation lane **1206**.

[0146] The unloading transportation lane **1206** operates similarly to the loading transportation lane **1204** and allows bench assemblies **902** that include matured plants ready for harvesting to be unloaded from the grow zone. When the bench assembly **902** is pushed out of the row **1202** from the tenth position, the bench assembly **902** can be moved using conveyance equipment, such as that previously described, that may include unloading elevator **1210** to move the bench assembly out of the grow zone **318** using the unloading transportation lane **1206**.

[0147] As further shown in FIGS. 12 and 13, the growing structure **1200** may also include a plenum wall **1212** and a return wall **1214**. The plenum wall **1212** can be positioned at a first side of the growing structure **1200** at a first end of the rows **1202**. The return wall **1214** can be positioned at an opposite end of the growing structure **1202** than the plenum wall **1212**. The plenum wall **1212** can operate to supply an air flow having predetermined characteristics to the grow zone **318**. As will be further described, the plenum wall **1212** can be fluidly connected to one or more air handling units that supply a volume of air that is separated and supplied to each pathway in the growing structure. The return wall **1214** is positioned and configured to collect air flowing in the growing structure **1200** can return the air to the air handling units where it is re-conditioned and then re-supplied to the grow zone.

[0148] As further shown in this example, the propagation zone **312** can be positioned in the growing structure **1200** and can be combined within the grow zone module. The propagation zone **312** can be positioned at an outer side of the growing structure and can be positioned between the loading transportation lane **1204** and the return wall **1214**. In this position, the plants in the

propagation zone are subjected to desirable environmental conditions that are supplied by the environmental controls of the grow zone **318**. Thus, separate environmental controls or a separate propagation chamber are not required.

[0149] The propagation zone **312** can operate, in one example, as a push system. In such an example, the trays **700** of plants **704** are pushed into the propagation zone **312** at the propagation loading zone **310**. When one tray or bench is pushed into the propagation zone **312**, one tray or bench is pushed out of the propagation zone **312**. In such a manner, the propagated plants are pushed through the propagation zone **312**. In other examples, other methods of automated or manual loading and unloading can be used.

[0150] Turning now to FIGS. **14A-C**, another example growing structure **1400** is shown. In this example, the growing structure **1400** is configured to have ten rows **1402** (see FIG. **14B**) and two columns **1404** (see FIG. **14C**). The configuration of the growing structure **1400** can define twenty growing pathways **1406**. The growing structure **1400** can be used as a grow zone **318** or multiple such growing structures **1400** can be positioned next to each other to define a larger grow zone module **318**. In another example, five of the structures **1400** shown can be positioned side-by-side to define a grow zone **318** that includes one hundred grow pathways **1406**. In other examples, other size grow zones **318** can be used. In other examples, the grow zone **318** can be one large zone partitioned into ten columns **1404** and ten rows **1402** to create one hundred grow pathways. It is understood that the grow zone module can vary in size and can include more than one hundred grow pathways **1406** or can include less than one hundred grow pathways **1406**.

[0151] As further shown, the grow structure can include a loading transportation lane **1408** and an unloading transportation lane **1410**. The loading transportation lane **1408** and the unloading transportation lane **1410** can be configured as previously described and can be used to load and unload the float and/or benches into or from the growing structure **1400**, respectively.

[0152] As further shown, the propagation zone **312** may be positioned in the growing structure **1400**. The propagation zone **312** can be positioned at an end of the growing structure **1400** and can be positioned adjacent the loading transportation lane **1408**.

[0153] The growing structure **1400** can be made of any suitable support structure that can support the weight of the floats and/or benches that will be suspended and positioned in the pathways **1406**. In one example, the support structure of the growing structure **1400** is made of steel racking that include support columns and beams arranged perpendicularly to each other to form the rows **1402** and the columns **1404** that, in turn, define the pathways **1406**. In other examples, the growing structure **1400** can be constructed of other suitable materials.

[0154] As shown in FIG. **33**, the growing structure **1400** may include one or more walkways **3304** that can be positioned periodically in the growing structure **1400**. The walkways **3304** can provide access to various areas in the growing structure for observation, repair, maintenance and the like. In the example shown, one row of the growing structure **1400** is shown and the row may include a rail system **3302** (such as the rail systems previously described) that can support multiple trays, floats, and/or benches of plants. Adjacent to the rail system **3302**, a walkway **3304** can be provided with suitable size to allow an operator to walk on the walkway **3304** to access the rail system **3302** and other rail systems (not shown) that may be positioned adjacent to the rail system **3302**. A safety rail **3306** can be provided proximate to the walkway **3304** to allow the operator to grasp and to provide safety. The walkways **3304** can be positioned at any suitable interval in the growing structure **1400** to provide access to the plants growing in the grow zone. In one example, a walkway **3304** is provided at every other row around a perimeter of the growing structure. Walkways **3304** can also be provided between columns to provide access to interior rows of plants in the grow zone.

[0155] It has been observed that the plants growing in the growing structure **1400** demonstrate improved development when the climate conditions are maintained at predetermined levels or within certain ranges in each growing pathway **1406**. The predetermined levels of climate conditions may vary between plant varieties. It has also been observed that it can be difficult to

maintain the predetermined climate conditions in the growing pathways unless the space of the growing pathways is sufficiently isolated. In some examples, barriers can be located between the growing pathways **1406** to improve the control of the climate conditions therein. For example, when vertical barriers are not positioned between the columns **1404** and when horizontal barriers are not positioned between the rows **1402**, the environmental conditions can fluctuate undesirably. Without barriers, the air flow between the pathways **1406** can mix and convection effects can cause hotter air to rise and cooler air to fall within the growing structure **1400**.

[0156] To reduce the undesirable effects previously described, vertical barriers and horizontal barriers can be positioned in between the rows **1402** and the columns **1404** to define the individual, separated pathways **1406**. In one example, vertical wall barriers can be constructed between the columns **1406**. In another example, vertical sheets of material such as tarps of a suitable plastic, vinyl, canvas or the like can be hung between the columns **1406** and secured to the rail systems that form the growing structure **1400**. Horizontal sheeting (or other barriers) can be positioned on the rail systems to form barriers between the vertically stacked rows **1402**. In other examples, insulated panels can be used. In other examples, the floats or benches that hold the plants in the growing structure **1400** form suitable horizontal barriers to restrict the intermixing of air flow between the rows **1402**. In such examples, trays or other horizontal barrier members can be positioned in the loading transportation lane **1408** and/or in the unloading transportation lane **1410** to separate the rows **1402** in the transportation lanes that would otherwise not include the floats or benches of plants.

[0157] To further improve the stability of the climate conditions within the grow zone and in each pathway **1406**, a method of delivering laminar flow of air throughout the grow zone is needed. An improved method of delivering a laminar airflow is described herein. In one example, the growing structure **1400** can include a plenum wall. The plenum wall **1420** can include a structure of ducts that can separate and guide air flow to each of the pathways **1406**. As shown, the plenum wall **1420** can be fluidly connected to one or more air handling units **1424**. The air handling units **1424** can supply a volume of conditioned air to the plenum wall **1420**. The plenum wall **1420** can separate and guide a supply of air to each of the pathways **1406** to produce a laminar air flow in each of the pathways **1406**. The laminar air flow may also have other predetermined climate parameters such as humidity, temperature and/or air flow rate.

[0158] The air flow can exit the air plenum wall **1420** and travel through each of the pathways **1406** in the growing structure. The return wall **1422** is positioned at an opposite end of the growing structure **1400** and serves to collect and return the air from the growing structure **1400** to the air handling units. The return wall **1422** can be fluidly connected to one or more air return ducts **1426**. The return ducts **1426** are also fluidly connected to the air handling units **1424**. The air flow can be re-conditioned and then re-supplied to the growing structure **1400** via the plenum wall **1420**. In the example shown, the growing structure **1400** includes two return ducts **1426** positioned on or above a top surface of the growing structure **1400**. In other examples, other quantities of return ducts **1426** can be used and the return ducts **1426** can be routed in other manners to the air handling units **1424**.

[0159] As can be seen, the air flow in the growing chamber moves in the direction of the arrows from the air plenum wall **1420** to the return wall **1422**. The plants that are positioned in the floats are loaded into the growing structure at the loading transportation lane **1408** and move through the growing structure **1400** in a direction opposite to the air flow direction. In this manner, the most mature plants are subjected to conditioned air that is closest to the plenum wall **1420**. The most mature plants can be subjected to air flow that has the predetermined characteristics or climate parameters. As can be appreciated, the air flow may change as the air moves over the plants as it travels from the air plenum wall **1420** to the return wall **1422**. The air may be heated and/or increase in humidity as it travels past the plants in the growing structure **1400**. This is an advantageous arrangement because the more mature plants transpire more than the younger plants

and prefer cooler more conditioned air. Younger plants transpire less and thus do not require air that is as conditioned as that flowing over mature plants. Accordingly, as shown, dehumidified, cooled air is delivered into the grow zone adjacent the mature plants and as it passes over the mature plants, the air flow increases in humidity and warms as it moves toward the younger plants located closer to the loading transportation lane **1408**. Thus, the laminar airflow within each pathway improves the climate within the pathway.

[0160] As shown in FIG. **15**, the growing structure **1400** may be positioned inside a structure **1502**. Thus, the growing facility **1500** includes a fully enclosed growing structure **1400** that is enclosed in an outer structure **1502**. Such a configuration allows the climate control systems or environmental control elements, such as air handling units **1424** and return ducts **1426** to be positioned inside an environmentally controlled chamber while also being positioned outside the grow zone **318**. Thus, the operation of the air handling units **1424**, the return ducts **1426** and other environmental control elements do not negatively affect the ability to maintain stable conditions in the grow zone **318** while also preserving the stable operation of the climate control systems.

[0161] As shown in FIG. **16**, another example growing module **1600** is shown. While sized differently from the growing structure **1400** previously described, the growing module **1600** includes many similar elements and is configured in a similar arrangement. In this example, the growing module **1600** can be fully enclosed in an outer building structure **1502**. The walls of the outer building structure **1502** are not shown for illustration purposes. The growing module **1600** can include a grow racking system **1602** that can define various rows and columns in the growing module **1600**. The grow racking system **1602** can include horizontal barriers to separate the rows in the racking system **1602** and can also include vertical barriers (not shown) to define a multitude of climate isolated grow pathways.

[0162] The growing structure **1600**, in this example, also includes four air handling units **1606** that are positioned at one end of the growing module **1600**. The air handling units **1606** are fluidly connected to the plenum wall **1608** that operates to separate and deliver air flow to each of the pathways or rows of the growing module **1600**. The return wall **1610** may be positioned at an opposite end of the growing module **1600** and can operate to return the air that has travelled within the growing module **1600** to the air handling units **1606** via the return ducts **1612**. As also shown, the growing structure **1600** can include a transportation lane **1604** that is a space or structural system adjacent or coupled to the grow racking system **1602** that allows plants or trays carrying floats of plants to be moved within the grow module **1600**.

[0163] FIGS. **17A** and **17B** illustrate growing facilities that can operate in different modes of operation in order to condition the air that enters the grow zone to have predetermined climate conditions or characteristics such as air temperature, dew point, humidity and the like. As shown, the growing facility **1700** can include a grow zone **318** as previously described. The grow zone **318** can be positioned inside a structure **1708**. The air handling units **1702** and a heat pump system **1704** can also be positioned inside the structure **1708** but outside the grow zone **318**. The air handling units **1702** can be coupled to the grow zone **318** to supply air flow to the grow zone **318**.

[0164] As further shown, the air handling units **1702** can be coupled to the heat pump system **1704**. The heat pump system can operate via suitable heat exchange devices and heat exchange fluids to move heat from inside the structure **1708** to outside the structure **1708** and vice versa. The heat pump system **1704** may include a dry cooler **1706** that is positioned outside the structure **1708** in an ambient external environment. The dry cooler **1706** can be coupled to the heat pump system **1704** with suitable conduits through which water or other suitable heat exchange fluid (e.g., refrigerant) can flow to transfer heat from inside the structure **1708** to the ambient environment outside the structure **1708**.

[0165] As shown in FIG. **17A**, a standard operating mode is shown. In the standard operating mode, the air that flows through the grow zone **318** accumulates moisture and raises the temperature and humidity of the air when it is returned to the air handling unit **1702**. The air must

be dehumidified and then cooled so that it can absorb moisture when it is re-supplied to the grow zone **318**. To achieve this result, the heat pump system **1704** can use water (or other heat exchange fluid) that is cooled by the dry coolers to remove heat and moisture from the returned air flow via a suitable heat exchanger in the heat pump system **1704**. The heat that is removed from the air and exchanged with the water (or other heat exchange fluid) can be rejected to the ambient environment via the dry cooler **1706**.

[0166] As shown in FIG. **17B**, the growing facility **1700** can also operate in a free cooling mode of operation. The free cooling mode of operation may be available in geographic locations in which the growing facility is located that have outside ambient conditions that are less than about 15° C. When such external ambient conditions are present, one or more of the heat pumps can be switched off and the dry cooler can use the external decreased temperatures to cool the water (or other heat exchange fluid). Such cooled water (or other heat exchange fluid) can be used to cool the air that is returned from the grow zone **318**. The free cooling mode of operation allows certain elements of the heat pump system (such as a condenser) to be switched off. The free cooling mode of operation allows the air to be conditioned to have the desired climate conditions with a reduced energy requirement. This makes the growing facility able to be operated more efficiently and at less cost than traditional of existing facilities.

[0167] Referring now to FIG. **18**, an example grow zone **318** is shown. A ventilation or air supply network **1800** is shown. The ventilation network **1800** can operate to deliver an airflow to the grow zone **318**. As previously described, it is desirable to maintain a laminar airflow in the grow zone **318**. It can be further desirable to maintain an airflow with an airspeed and volumetric flow rate that is consistent and stable across certain grow pathways in the grow zone **318**. To assist in achieving this result, the ventilation network **1800** can include one or more air handling units **1802** that are positioned outside the grow zone **318** but are fluidly connected to a plenum wall **1810** that is in fluid communication with the grow zone **318** to distribute the airflow. The air handling units **1802** can be connected to the plenum wall **1810** via one or more air distribution paths that can separate and distribute the air in a stable manner, such as a laminar stream of air, to each of the outlets of the plenum wall **1810**.

[0168] The ventilation network **1800** can also include a return wall **1806** positioned at an opposite end of the grow zone **318** from the plenum wall **1810**. The return wall **1806** can collect the air from the grow zone **318** and return the air to the air handling units **1802** via the return ducts **1808**.

[0169] Turning now to FIGS. **19** and **20**, an improved air distribution system is illustrated. The air distribution system includes an array of air handling units **1802**. The array can include any suitable number of air distribution assemblies **1900**. In this example, four air distribution assemblies **1900** are arranged in the array as shown. In other examples, other numbers of air distribution assemblies **1900** can be used as may be needed depending on the size of the grow zone **318**. Each air distribution assembly **1900** may include an air handling unit **1802** coupled to a first distribution channel **1902** and a second distribution channel **1904**. In the example shown, the first distribution channel **1902** and the second distribution channel are positioned vertically and operate to guide air in an upward and downward direction as shown. In other examples, the first separation of the air flow from the air handling unit **1802** can be in a horizontal or other direction.

[0170] As can be seen, the first distribution channel **1902** and the second distribution channel **1904** separate the airflow from the air handling unit **1802** in two substantially equal stream of airflow. Each air distribution assembly **1900** can then further separate and divide the air flow from each of the first and second distribution channels **1904** and **1905**, into two distribution sub-assemblies **1906**, **1908**, **1910**, and **1912**, having substantially equal streams of airflow. Each of the distribution sub-assemblies **1906**, **1908**, **1910**, and **1912** can be further separate the air flow into sub-assemblies **1914**, **1916**, **1918**, **1920**, **1922**, **1924**, **1926**, and **1928**. Accordingly, the laminar airflow coming out of air handling unit **1802** can be subdivided into 8 equal streams of laminar airflow.

[0171] As shown in FIG. **20**, an enlarged illustration of the air distribution assembly **1900** is shown.

As can be appreciated, each of the air distribution assemblies **1900** in the array of assemblies can include the elements as described below. Only one assembly **1900** is shown and described in detail for the sake of brevity.

[0172] The air distribution assembly **1900** can further divide and separate the air flow downstream of the first distribution channel **1902** and the second distribution channel **1904**. In the example shown, the assembly **1900** further includes a third channel **1906**, a fourth channel **1908**, a fifth channel **1910** and a sixth channel **1912**. The third channel **1906** can include a first manifold **1914** and a second manifold **1916**. The fourth channel **1908** can include a third manifold **1918** and a fourth manifold **1920**. The fifth channel **1910** can include a fifth manifold **1922** and a sixth manifold **1926**. The sixth channel **1912** can include a seventh manifold **1924** and an eighth manifold **1928**. Thus, the air from the air handler can be separated and divided to result in eight manifolds **1914**, **1916**, **1918**, **1920**, **1922**, **1924**, **1926** and **1928**.

[0173] Each of the manifolds can have the same structure to further divide and separate the air flow to be guided into each of the grow pathways in the grow zone **318**. Each of the manifolds can have the structure shown in FIGS. **21-24** and further explained below. For the sake of brevity, the first manifold **1914** is described. It should be appreciated, however, that each of the other manifolds, namely the second manifold **1916**, the third manifold **1918**, the fourth manifold **1920**, the fifth manifold **1922**, the sixth manifold **1926**, the seventh manifold **1924**, and the eighth manifold **1928** can include the same or a similar structure.

[0174] Each of the manifolds can be connected to or form part of the plenum wall **1810** previously described. In some examples, the various manifolds (i.e., the eight manifolds) can be positioned adjacent to and/or abutting one another to form the plenum wall **1810**. In other examples, other quantities of manifolds can be used to create a plenum wall sized according to the size of the grow zone module.

[0175] The manifold **1914** can be rectangular shaped element that can include an upstream side **2104** and a downstream side **2208**. The upstream side **2104** can be coupled to the channel **1906** to accept air from the air handling unit **1802** and to further separate and divide the air flow. The upstream side **2104** can include an opening **2102** that can be coupled to the channel **1906**. In some examples, the manifold **1914** and the channel **1906** can be made from galvanized sheet metal and formed into the desired shape. The opening **2102** can be coupled to the channel **1906** using suitable connections known in the art. In other examples, the manifold **1914** and the channel **1906** can be made of other materials such as plastics, foams, other alloys and the like.

[0176] As shown in the section view of FIG. **22**, the manifold can include a diverter **2202** that can divert air flowing into the opening **2102** into lateral directions. The diverter **2202** (see FIG. **24**) can be a pyramid shaped projection that projects toward the opening **2102** from the downstream side **2208** of the diverter. In other examples, the diverter **2202** can have other shapes such as cones, ramps, and the like.

[0177] The downstream side **2208** is shown in the downstream view of FIG. **23**. As can be seen, the downstream side **2208** of the manifold **1914** can include one or more vents **2204** that may be spaced apart from one another to allow the airflow to be further separated and distributed from the entry of the airflow in opening **2102**. In the example shown, the manifold **1914** can include four equally sized and spaced vents **2204**. The vents **2204** can include a panel that is perforated with an array of holes. When the airflow flows out of the manifold **1914** and into the grow zone **318**, a laminar, well-distributed and stable air flow can be produced. The manifold **1914** can include a vent **2204** that is aligned with a grow pathway in the grow zone **318** so that a stable airflow is produced for each grow pathway.

[0178] Referring now to FIG. **25**, the environmental or climate control aspects of a ventilation system **2500** are illustrated. In the example shown, the air handler **2502** can operate to deliver air flow to the grow zone **318**. The air flow can have predetermined characteristics or climate parameters including a desired humidity, temperature, flow rate, etc. The air handler **2502** can be

coupled to the heat pump **2504**. The heat pump **2504** can operate to supply cold water **2506** (via a cold water loop, for example) to the air handler to cool the air and/or remove moisture from the air returning from the grow zone **318**. The heat pump **2504** can also operate to supply warm water **2508** (via a warm water loop, for example) to the air handler **2502** to warm the air to a desired temperature after the moisture is removed from the air and before the air is re-supplied to the grow zone **318**.

[0179] FIG. **25** shows a first mode of operation in which the ventilation system operates as previously described to first cool and dehumidify air that is returned from the grow zone **318**. As can be appreciated, the air is warmed and collects moisture from the grow zone **318** as the air travels through the grow zone **318**. Thus, the air needs first to be cooled in order to remove the moisture from the air. Before the air is re-supplied to the grow zone **318**, the air needs to be re-heated for optimal growing conditions. Thus, the warm water loop from the heat pump **2504** can warm the air in the air handler **2502** before the air is re-supplied to the grow zone **318**.

[0180] FIG. **26** illustrates a second mode of operation of the ventilation system **2500**. In this example, the plants in the grow zone **318** may be in a stage of development or be of a plant variety in which the plants do not evaporate moisture in an amount that causes the airflow in the grow zone **318** to collect excessive moisture and result in a high humidity content. When the air returns to the air handler, the air may not need to be conditioned to remove excessive amounts of moisture from the air. When the returned air is in such a condition, the warm water from the warm water loop **2508** can be combined with the cold water in the cool water loop **2506** to lower the temperature of the air to a temperature above a dew point. This prevents unwanted dehumidification that would otherwise occur. The air can then be re-supplied to the grow zone **318** without the need to cool the air to condensate the moisture and then re-heat the air before re-supplying the air to the grow zone **318**. Thus, energy savings can result by operating the ventilation system **2500** in the second mode of operation shown in FIG. **26**.

[0181] FIG. **27** illustrates an example environmental or climate control apparatus **2700**. The climate control apparatus **2700** can include similar elements to the ventilation system **2500** previously described and can operate in the first mode of operation and in the second mode of operation. In this example, the climate control apparatus **2700** can include various components that can operate to supply air flow having predetermined characteristics to the grow zone **318**. The apparatus **2700** can include one or more air handlers **2702** that can be fluidly connected to the grow zone **318** via the plenum wall and the return wall (not shown).

[0182] The air handlers **2702** can be coupled to cold water transport assemblies **2704** and to warm water transport assemblies **2706**. The air handlers **2702** can be coupled to the cold water transport assemblies **2704** via cold water loop **2714**. The cold water transport assemblies **2704** can provide cold water via the cold water loop **2714** to cool the air when it returns from the grow zone **318** as previously described. The cold water transport assemblies **2704** can include pumps and other suitable piping to guide and supply the cold water to heat exchangers in the air handlers **2702**.

[0183] Similarly, the warm water transport assemblies **2706** can be coupled to the air handlers **2702** via warm water loop **2718**. The warm transport assemblies **2706** can supply warm water via the warm water loop **2718** to warm the air before the air is re-supplied to the grow zone **318**. The warm water transport assemblies **2706** can include pumps and other suitable piping to guide and supply the warm water to heat exchangers in the air handlers **2702**.

[0184] The warm transport assemblies **2706** and the cold water transport assemblies **2704** can also be coupled to the heat dissipation assemblies **2708**. The heat dissipation assemblies **2708** can, in turn, be coupled to the dry coolers **2712**. The heat dissipation assemblies **2708** can exchange heat from the cold water loop with the external ambient environment via the dry coolers. The heat dissipation assemblies can also exchange heat from the warm water loop with the external environment via the dry coolers.

[0185] As further shown, the cold water transport assemblies **2704** can also be coupled to one or

more heat pumps **2710**. The warm water transport assemblies **2706** can also be coupled to the one or more heat pumps **2710**. The heat pumps **2710** can exchange heat between the cold water loop **2714** and the warm water loop **2718**.

[0186] The air handlers **2702** can be used to collect condensate off the air handlers and send the condensate back to the irrigation system for reuse.

[0187] The air handlers **2702**, the cold water transport assemblies **2704**, the warm water transport assemblies **2706**, the heat dissipation assemblies **2708** and/or the heat pumps **2710** can be modular and/or pre-assembled prior to being installed at the indoor growing facility. The various assemblies of the environmental control apparatus **2700** can be used to build different size indoor growing apparatuses. As can be appreciated, the number of components in the climate control apparatus **2700** is dependent on size of the grow zone **318**. The various assemblies can be modular in nature to be easily shipped to a building site for a growing facility and then be coupled together according to the needs of the local facility. The components such as the air handlers **2702**, the cold water transport assemblies **2704**, the warm water transport assemblies **2706**, the heat dissipation assemblies **2708** and/or the heat pumps **2710** can be modular in that they are pre-assembled at a manufacturing location and are sized to fit in conventional shipping containers and shipped to the building location of the growing facility.

[0188] The climate control apparatus **2700** can be positioned adjacent to the grow zone **318** as shown. The air handlers **2702**, the cold water transport assemblies **2704**, the warm water transport assemblies **2718**, the heat dissipation assemblies **2708**, and the heat pumps **2710** can all be positioned inside the indoor growing facility but outside the grow zone **318**. This configuration can allow efficient and stable operation of the climate control apparatus **2700**. The dry cooler **2712** is positioned outside the indoor growing facility so that it can exchange heat with the ambient environment as previously described.

[0189] The ventilation system **2500** is able to capture and retain the condensate collected from the returned humid air. The improved indoor farm system described herein can recycle the collected condensate. The collected water is cleaned and introduced into the irrigation system, where nutrients can be added to then feed the plants in the grow zone **318**. The indoor farm system described herein, captures and recycles the unabsorbed nutrient rich water from the ebb and flood irrigation system, as well as the condensate collected from the return air. Thus, the indoor farm system described herein, is able to reduce or minimize the amount of water needed to grow the plants in the grow zone **318** compared to other farming methods and facilities.

[0190] Referring now to FIG. **28**, a configuration of a growing structure **2800** is further described. In this example, the growing structure **2800** can be positioned in the grow zone **318** and can serve to hold the plants that are growing therein. As shown, the growing structure **2800** can include one or more side barriers **2802** that can separate the columns in the grow zone **318**. The growing structure **2800** can also include one or more horizontal barriers **2804** that can separate the rows in the grow zone **318**. The side barriers **2802** and/or the horizontal barriers **2804** can be mounted to rack structure as previously described and shown or can be formed as wall members. The barriers **2802**, **2804** separate the growing structure **2800** in the various grow pathways **2806** as shown.

[0191] Each of the grow pathways **2806** can have a similar configuration and can be sized and configured to support one or more floats or bench assemblies of plants. For example, each grow pathway **2806** can support a bench assembly **2808**. The bench assembly **2808** can have the configuration of the bench assembly **900** (FIG. **9**) previously described. Each bench assembly **2808** can be supported on a set of rails **2810**. The rails **2810** can be a support beam or other structure that may include wheels, conveyors, rollers or other components that allow the bench assembly **2808** to be pushed along the length of the grow pathway **2806** as the plants in the bench assembly **2808** develop and mature.

[0192] Each grow pathway **2806** may also include one or more lighting elements **2812**. Any suitable lighting elements can be used that can be controlled to emit a suitable light having

predetermined characteristics such as intensity, wavelength, duration, etc. The lighting elements **2812** can be suitable LED lights, for example. In other examples, other lighting elements **2812** can be used. The lighting elements **2812** can be positioned above the bench assemblies **2808** to distribute light to the plants in the bench assemblies according to a predetermined lighting schedule.

[0193] The growing structure **2800** can also include elements to allow for the irrigation of the plants in the bench assemblies **2808**. The plants can be irrigated using an ebb and flood method of irrigation as previously described. To allow such a method of irrigation, the growing structure **2800** can include one or more water dispensers **2816** positioned in each grow pathway **2806**. The water dispensers can be connected to an irrigation system that include water sources. The water dispensers **2816** can fill the bench assemblies **2808** with water according to a predetermined irrigation schedule to provide water and nutrients to the plants in the bench assemblies **2808**.

[0194] Each grow pathway **2806** may also include a gutter **2818** that extends along the grow pathway **2806** at a position under the bench assemblies **2808**. The gutter **2818** can be channel or other conduit with an open are facing upwards that can allow the water that drains from the bench assemblies **2808** to be collected. The collected water that drains from the bench assemblies **2808** during irrigation can be recycled through the irrigation system and re-used. Such a method of capturing and recycling the water used during irrigation makes the growing structure and methods of use more efficient than traditional or existing systems and methods.

[0195] The water dispensers **2816** can be periodically positioned along the length of each grow pathway **2806**. Only one dispenser **2816** is required to fill each bench assembly. However, multiple water dispensers **2816** can also be used for each bench assembly **2808**. The water dispensers **2816** can also be individually controlled or controlled in groups relative to the water dispenser's position along the grow pathway **2806**. As previously described, the plants in the grow pathway are developing and maturing as they move along the grow pathway toward the plenum wall. The plants in each grow pathway **2806**, therefore, may require different irrigation schedules because of the varying stages of development. The individual control or group control of the water dispensers **2816** along each grow pathway **2806** can provide for individualized irrigation schedules at various positions in the grow pathway. The lighting elements **2812** can also be individually controlled or controlled in groups to deliver individualized lighting schedules to the plants at various locations in the grow pathway **2806**.

[0196] While not shown in FIG. **28**, the growing structure **2800** can also include one or more sensors or other information collection components positioned along the grow pathway **2806**. In one example, the growing structure **2800** can include temperature sensors, humidity sensors, air flow sensors, carbon dioxide sensors, and other sensors. The sensors can provide information to a centralized control system regarding the growing conditions in the growing structure **2800**.

[0197] The growing structure **2800** can also include cameras, or imaging devices that can capture photos or images of the plants in the growing structure **2800**. The images can be used to automatically determine a size, health, or other characteristics of the plants.

[0198] Referring now to FIG. **29**, an example float scraping apparatus **2900** is shown. The float scraping apparatus **2900** can operate to remove plants, growing medium or other materials from the floats after the floats are unloaded from the grow zone **318**. The float can be inserted into the apparatus **2900** at the float input position **2902**. The float can be moved along the conveyor **2912** to the float exit position **2904**. The float scraping apparatus **2900** can include one or more scraping or removal devices such as blades or wiping belts that can move along surfaces of the float to scrape plants or roots that may be extending above or below the surfaces of the float. In the example shown, the apparatus **2900** can include a lower scraper **2914** that can scrape the roots from the float. The apparatus **2900** can also include an upper scraper **2910** that can remove the plant from the float. The first hopper **2906** can serve to convey the removed materials away from the conveyor **2912** using a suitable conveyor or belt mechanism. The second hopper **2908** can serve to convey

the materials removed by the upper scraper away from the conveyor 2912 using a suitable conveyor or belt mechanism.

[0199] The example methods and apparatuses described herein may be at least partially embodied in the form of computer-implemented processes and apparatus for practicing those processes and/or the described functionality. The disclosed methods may also be at least partially embodied in the form of tangible, non-transient machine readable storage media encoded with computer program code. The media may include, for example, RAMs, ROMs, CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, BD-ROMs, hard disk drives, flash memories, or any other non-transient machine-readable storage medium, or any combination of these mediums, wherein, when the computer program code is loaded into and executed by a computer, the computer becomes an apparatus for practicing the method. The methods may also be at least partially embodied in the form of a computer into which computer program code is loaded and/or executed, such that, the computer becomes an apparatus for practicing the methods. When implemented on a general-purpose processor, the computer program code segments configure the processor to create specific logic circuits. The methods may alternatively be at least partially embodied in a digital signal processor formed of application specific integrated circuits for performing the methods.

[0200] The foregoing description of the embodiments has been provided for purposes of illustration and description. It is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the disclosure. Individual elements or features of a particular embodiment are generally not limited to that particular embodiment, but, where applicable, are interchangeable and can be used in a selected embodiment, even if not specifically shown or described. The same may also be varied in many ways. Such variations are not to be regarded as a departure from the disclosure, and all such modifications are intended to be included within the scope of the disclosure.

Claims

1. An indoor growing facility comprising: a climate control apparatus configured to produce a plurality of streams of airflow, each stream of airflow having predetermined climate conditions; and a plurality of growing pathways wherein each growing pathway of the plurality of growing pathways is isolated from an adjacent growing pathway to allow introduction of a stream of airflow of the plurality of streams of airflow into each growing pathway.
2. The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein each stream of airflow of the plurality of streams of airflow has substantially similar climate conditions.
3. The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein the predetermined climate conditions comprise air speed, temperature, and humidity.
4. The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein the climate control apparatus comprises an air handler coupled to a distribution assembly, the distribution assembly comprising a plurality of channels to separate and divide an initial airflow into the plurality of streams of airflow.
5. The indoor growing facility of claim 4, wherein the distribution assembly further comprises a plurality of manifolds coupled to the plurality of channels, each manifold of the plurality of manifolds comprising at least one vent configured to introduce one stream of airflow to one growing pathway.
6. The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein the climate control apparatus further comprises a return system coupled to the air handler that is configured to return the plurality of streams of airflow from each of the growing pathways to the air handler.
7. The indoor growing facility of claim 6, wherein the airflow is modified after the airflow is returned from the plurality of growing pathways to have the predetermined climate conditions before the airflow is re-introduced into the plurality of growing pathways.
8. The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein each stream of airflow of the plurality of streams of airflow comprise a laminar flow.

- 9.** The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein the plurality of growing pathways are defined by a plurality of vertical barriers and a plurality of horizontal barriers.
- 10.** The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein the climate control apparatus is separated from the plurality of growing pathways by an enclosure.
- 11.** The indoor growing facility of claim 1, wherein the plurality of growing pathways are defined by a growing structure comprising: a plurality of vertical barriers and a plurality of horizontal barriers; a plenum wall positioned on a first side of the growing structure configured to supply the plurality of streams of airflow into the plurality of growing pathways; and a return wall positioned at a second side of the growing structure opposite to the first side configured to return air from the growing structure to the first side.
- 12.** The indoor growing facility of claim 11, wherein the growing structure further comprises a loading lane positioned adjacent the plurality of growing pathways and a loading elevator positioned in the loading lane, wherein the loading elevator is configured to move in the loading lane to selectively load plants into one growing pathway of the plurality of growing pathways.
- 13.** The indoor growing facility of claim 12, wherein the loading lane is positioned between the array of grow pathways and the return wall.
- 14.** The indoor growing facility of claim 13, wherein the growing structure further comprises an unloading lane positioned adjacent the plurality of growing pathways and an unloading elevator positioned in the unloading lane, wherein the unloading lane is positioned on a side of the plurality of growing pathways opposite to the loading lane.
- 15.** The indoor growing facility of claim 12, wherein the growing structure further comprises a propagation zone positioned between the loading zone and the return wall, the propagation zone comprising a plurality of rows for supporting plants during a propagation stage of growth.
- 16.** The indoor growing facility of claim 11, wherein the plenum wall is coupled to a distribution assembly to separate an initial airflow from an air handler into each stream of airflow of the plurality of streams of airflow.
- 17.** The indoor growing facility of claim 11, wherein the plenum wall comprises a plurality of manifolds, each manifold of the plurality of manifolds positioned adjacent to one another to form the plenum wall.
- 18.** The indoor growing facility of claim 17, wherein each manifold of the plurality of manifolds comprises a plurality of vents through which the air flow exits each manifold, each vent of the plurality of vents aligned with one grow pathway of the array of grow pathways.
- 19.** The indoor growing facility of claim 18, wherein each manifold of the plurality of manifolds comprises a diverter positioned centrally between plurality of vents, the diverter having a sloped surface to guide airflow toward each vent of the plurality of vents.
- 20.** The indoor growing facility of claim 16, wherein the distribution assembly comprises a plurality of channels coupled between the air handler and the plenum wall to separate the air flow, wherein a number of the plurality of channels corresponds to a number of the plurality of manifolds, each channel of the plurality of channels coupled to one manifold of the plurality of manifolds.
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