The Chirp Sensor: A plug-and-play solution to moisture monitoring in hydroponics

If you want high yields in hydroponics, then you need to monitor moisture quite closely. Watering plants when they need it – and not on a timer – is critical if you want to maintain ideal water and nutrient transport within your plants. As I've discussed in a previous post, most of the cheap sensors available for this are inadequate as they are affected by the salts present in hydroponics and do not offer proper sensing of the amount of moisture in hydroponics media. Although there are a lot of different sensors that do offer adequate measurements – which we will be discussing in future posts – these are usually not easy to use and often require custom electronics, powering and sometimes complicated calibration. In this post we are going to discuss the easiest solution if you want to have adequate moisture monitoring within your crop with least possible hassle. The chirp sensor. *Note that this post has not been sponsored by Chirp's creator or anyone else.*

The Chirp moisture sensor

The Chirp sensors were created a couple of years back. They are available for purchase here. The sensors use a capacitive measuring principle, which means that the sensor detects moisture by a change in the capacitance of the media in the presence of water, rather than by a change of electrical resistance, and, therefore, the sensor is not strongly affected by the salts present in hydroponics. Additionally, the sensor plates are not corroded by the flow of current between the electrodes. The plates of the sensor are actually covered in an insulating material, giving the sensor the ability to last for a long time. The big advantage of the

Chirp alarm sensor is also how easy it is to set up and how useful it can be to growers.

In order to set up the sensor, you will need to put it in the media at the point where the media will require watering, you then wait a couple of minutes for the sensor reading to stabilize and you will then press the button at the top of the sensor in order to indicate that this is the threshold for moisture where the sensor will start “chirping”. Whenever the sensor reaches this reading again it will start chirping, chirping louder and more frequently as the moisture level drops below this point. It will also only do so when it detects light, so it will not detect the need for watering when the lights are out. **When it chirps, you water, that’s it.**

If you want to figure out when to set up the sensor for watering, you can set up a pot with media (with no plants), water it till there is consistent run-off, wait for the run-off to stop, weight it – this will be the saturated weight – then weight it again every hour to quantitatively measure the dry-back of the media. You can then set up the chirp sensor when 60-70% of the water weight has been lost, which indicates a condition where watering is going to be necessary. This measurement can then be used for the watering of your plants, deeper or shallower dry-backs might be optimal depending on your conditions, but the above is a good starting point where you will not risk overwatering your plants.

The advantage of the Chirp sensor is that all of this can be done without any fancy setup, so it can be as good for watering a single plant as it could be for an entire greenhouse if enough Chirp sensors are used. Additionally, the Chirp sensors are also i2C compatible, so if you buy Chirp alarm sensors to perform this sort of monitoring you will still be able to hook them up to Arduinos or other microcontrollers in the future in order to perform your own quantitative moisture measurements and automate the entire watering cycle. **If you’re looking for a low-cost, reliable yet**

expandable plug-and-play solution for moisture monitoring then the Chirp sensor is the way to go.