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Letter from a Frustrated Retailer

Kathy Wheaton



We've been here since 1972. Lots of good. Lots of tough times. Lots of in-between.

But this season I was determined to not just go through the motions. To make something different. Things have been tough the last three years—for almost all of us.

I was not willing, or able, to have another bad year. I didn't want to be like so many. Gone after all these years. I've read the books (many over the years), perused the articles, been to classes.

But this "recession"—the eroding of the market, the customers changing their ways—has added up to tough times for us all. The industry is in trouble. And I believe some part is more or less self-inflicted. We've let things that are out of our control, control us.

We are told (by all the folks who know these things) that consumers don't want to garden as much. Why not? What are we doing that's not inspiring and moving them?

I was tired of waiting for times to get better. For folks to want to spend their money again. I was tired of making excuses. For them. For me. For the nursery. The economy is bad. The weather is bad. The world is bad. But I believe it's a chicken-and-egg kind of thing. The customer isn't going to buy with his or her limited dollars what we don't have or what looks like it has needed a home for a while, from overworked, underpaid, tired, grumpy, complaining sales folks. If we want those dollars we MUST make it pleasurable for customers to part with them.

Our outlook was bad. Our future didn't look so good, either. Growers and retailers, small and big, well-known and just local, closing their doors.

I DIDN'T WANT TO BE ONE OF THEM!

And so we took a walk through the nursery. Not a regular walk, a REAL walk, with both eyes open, way open. We'd had to cut staff when things were tough; we had cut inventory; we had tightened our belts. Did more with less. Unfortunately, it showed. We didn't think so, but if we're honest, and if we really looked, it showed. A lot.

What we saw on our walk was a somewhat tired, understocked, not quite clean nursery. Nice, but lacking energy. It was "less." A good place, but not a GREAT place, not the place it had been and could/should be. Not the place that said "we believe you will come." Not the place that said "we are here to help you."

It looked like a place where the staff and the inventory had been cut; a place that was struggling. Old-time customers said all the right things: "Sorry things are tough. Sure wish we could spend more, help you out more." Many had their own stories of layoffs, hours cut, etc.

And so the cycle went, for three years in a row. I knew I couldn't take a fourth. Not money-wise, not work-wise. I could NOT sit and watch 40-plus years slowly slide away.

I decided to gamble. This was January 15, 2012. Not much time to pull it together. If we were going to go out of business, it was going to be on my terms. So with no savings left, no credit line left, and only half our staff of three years ago left, it was daunting. But as I said, I decided to gamble.

We added two employees (we couldn't afford them, but we couldn't afford to NOT have them—I could live without a check for a while longer to keep my job). Their first job: CLEAN, STOCK AND SMILE. And smile and be upbeat. NO MATTER WHAT. To help people and just do so many things we used to. Just two new people with no plant knowledge, but with great energy. It was a start, and it was like a snowball going downhill. Only we were headed uphill.

Soon, we added another landscape crew. And two more workers. We worked with our two best vendors. They helped extending our terms a bit (it helped them move some product and it filled our shelves). And we bought inventory. LOTS of inventory. Solid—no frills—but good fresh stock.

WE QUIT BEING AFRAID. We had been dying a slow death; it may have taken two years or 10, but we were slowly and surely declining. And now, well, it's a long road with many miles to go, but we are back to enjoying the trip.



We raised prices on many products (yes, I said raised). We fired a vendor who had great product but wasn't willing or able to step up to our level of expectations of service. We raised our landscape rates. We looked at where there were holes in our programs. How could we do MORE and earn that increase, so that we weren't just saying the same thing is going to cost more. How could we make it worth more? We truly looked at everything we could think of (and we still are).

We have never been so busy. I have never been unable to keep up until now. We are off the charts. I guess that means a 10 on [*GrowerTalks*' Weekend Rating] scale. April ended up UP 80% over last year. May is well on its way to the same. Our landscape installation is up 300% and I have to turn people away. I'm concerned about not having enough staff.

Could it crash tomorrow? Maybe. Could it rain for a month? Certainly. But last week—in the rain—folks were still shopping. I'm excited again. Not because of the dollars, but because I'm doing something. I'm not just waiting for the world to get better, I'm doing everything I can to change our world.

The better weather this spring has helped, of course, but it's really about filling the shelves—you CANNOT sell it if you don't have it. It's about making sure everything is super clean. It's about supporting your vendors. It's about caring enough about your customers' needs to make it happen.

I had a lady who was heading out after making her purchase. She stopped, turned around and said: "You have worked really hard this winter. It's really clean. Really clean. That's really important to me."

She turns and starts to go, then turns back one more time and says: "Really important. See you soon!"

We added a couple people just to make things look better. We filled—really filled—the shelves. And we quit bitching about the state of the world. We focused on the good. Told good stories, not sad "oh my god" stories. And it's amazing. And the weather improved. And people are talking and it is good. Almost every person makes a comment about how great it looks. How much there is to choose from. We aren't fancy. We're still weak in some areas. We still need inventory. A new POS system. And we're careful. We haven't jumped off a cliff here. We just wrote some orders. Swept some floors and started smiling again. And it feels good.

Would have it been a good season anyhow? Maybe. But I don't think so. Maybe a better season, but not a record-breaker.

I can hear every one of you saying "Well, not here" or "We can't do that because (fill in the blank)." You not only can, you HAVE TO ... unless, of course, you are ready to walk away, give up and throw in the towel. Most of you can find it in your belly to dig deep one more time. This year can be the year that yours is the NEW GREAT PLACE that everyone wants to shop.

And if you think you can't afford it? Neither could we! Not the people, nor the inventory. And both have been the best investment I ever made. We couldn't afford NOT to go for it.

I would like to challenge every owner/manager out there to go out, walk around and find 10 things that could be better. Cleaner. Fuller. It doesn't have to cost much, if anything, to fix. Sometimes just moving stuff around works. Talk with your vendors. Ask them to help you have a special something each week.

I'm telling you, each and every one, big or small, old or new, fancy or "just country," we all can do it. So start today. Not tomorrow. Today. You'll be glad you did.

Or, if not, then maybe it's time to hang up the shovel and shut the gate. **GP**

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