

## Kiss My Aster

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### Yes, We Have No Bananas

Amanda Thomsen



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Remember last spring when garden centers had an unprecedented year in which sales were up 60000% and we just sold everything we could because there was NO WAY this perfect storm could be reproduced this year? Remember when growers pushed out 2021 product in 2020 because who knew what the future held? Remember when your veggie starts sold out before March was over? Remember when you got a cut-and-pasted email that you wouldn't be getting any tropicals this year? It's like living in the song that never ends!

The customers we wondered whether or not they'd return after the pandemic gardens of 2020 are all back for more and we are not okay. Getting stuff to sell and staying staffed is a really big deal in 2021, and I haven't yet decided if this column's purpose is to just sit with you and commiserate or try and prop you up and offer solutions (where honestly there aren't many).

I do want you to think about this:

- Tell the world you're short staffed and ask for patience, on social media, in emails and in person. It's nothing to get weird about—it's happening all over. No retail establishment should have to ask their patrons for good manners and yet here we are. (Please feel free to laminate my July 2013 *Green Profit* column "High Fives for the Unicorns" and tack it next to the register.)

This job requires encyclopedic knowledge of plants, a tolerance for heat, more endurance than it should take and a special kind of martyrdom that keeps one out of one's own garden in order to help the masses with theirs. If you put that in the "Help Wanted" section, who exactly would show up? It's okay to lament this publicly; YOU ARE HUMANS. What staff you have deserves to be treated with respect and dignity by your customers, from senior staff to the checkout and loading area, even if you're out of dipladenia. I mean, ESPECIALLY if you're out of dipladenia, if I'm being truthy.

- This is a "make-it-work" moment. It's high time to push flowering shrubs for containers, start castor beans and nasturtiums for sale (yeah, even though castor beans are incredibly toxic, they look tropical and sprout within ... minutes!), show them what fennel or hostas can look like in a container. You need to work with what you have and make it look and sound like it's better than the real thing. It's the challenge on "Project Runway" where the designers have to make a capsule collection out of doggie bags. Use this opportunity to clear things out. You can make a silk purse out of a sow thistle.

- What happens next year? How can we even know and now isn't the time for strategy—it's time to burn our candles at all three ends. But let the issue lurk there behind the mop bucket and under the sink because I don't think this is going away.
- Customers with general questions, especially on the phone, must be sent to your local county extension office to save your souls. This is what they're there for. SAVE YOURSELVES.
- Cheesecake in the break room.

There's a light at the end of the tunnel called July. Until then, choose appropriate coping mechanisms to reward yourself for the tough times you're going through. Be kind to yourselves and even the vendors that have let you down. Let customers know we're staggering through weird times and things are usually a lot better/different/less weird and their patience, business and loyalty is appreciated. **GP**

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