

Features

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The Indoor Plant Sales Trend

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"Foliage is tanking." That was the subject line of an email I received from a grower of larger-form and more uncommon tropicals. Foliage is everywhere—and that's the problem, the grower intimated.

"Suddenly the Instagram culture around plants is dropping FAST. Liners you couldn't buy for years are available in huge numbers and the foliage demand is nowhere near where it was. With certain exceptions, I believe the market has been oversaturated. Monrovia is jumping on the bandwagon, but I think it's too late for another big player to move into it.

"Things like Philo Pink Princess that were commanding huge money are now back to a normal price point. There will always be truly rare things like variegated bananas, which can't be shipped from Asia right now, so the price for them is sky high, but ... it's all becoming readily available to the consumer. I've been saying since 2019 that the bubble would burst in two years and I think we're seeing it."

Responses to that assessment? First from horticulturist and designer Kelly Norris:

"I had to chuckle when I read this. Could it be that the relatively limited palette of foliage offerings that growers have mass produced by the bajillions has finally reached the point of not satiating the appetites of young gardeners? I'm not saying there isn't new plant development happening in foliage and tropicals, but for all the surge in the last couple of years, it would seem there should be a factor of 10 more if there was an innovative appetite to meet the moment. (And this work is happening to amazing effect in Southeast Asia, etc. The last two years haven't exactly been conducive to smooth international trade, of course. But ...) Maybe that speaks to the bets hedged in the C-suites about whether it was destined to become mainstream or simply remain a fad."

And from Elizabeth Russell-Skehan at Russell's Garden Center in Wayland, Massachusetts: "At Russell's Garden Center, we're still selling foliage plants in record-high numbers. We keep getting younger new customers who are embracing foliage plants and decorative pots!"

I also received the following non-foliage take from Troy Lucht of Malmberg's Greenhouse & Garden Centers in Minnesota. Here's what he had to say:

"Sometimes, I think we can have a difference of opinions based on the glass half-full or half-empty philosophy. As you can imagine, and have certainly noticed, most people in our industry must have a glass half-full mentality to continue to be optimistic over all the years. The past two years have been very strong for our industry and it really

came just in time, as many businesses were struggling with the slow degradation of their facilities, growth of costs and stagnation of sales.

“My thought on the foliage tanking perspective is that it certainly cannot continue to grow like it was and it must slow down and maybe even decrease in certain categories. In our garden centers over the past two years, we have seen tremendous growth in vegetables and herbs from 2019. But how do I look at these numbers?

Herb sales in 2020—up 100%

Herb sales in 2021—down 10%

Vegetable sales in 2020—up 110%

Vegetable sales in 2021—up 10%

“Do I say that herbs are tanking? Yet, using the glass half-full analogy, my new glass after 2020 is twice as large. So, even though 2021 herb sales were down, they are still much higher than prior to 2020. We are starting at a new, much-higher number and can only work to maintain this new number or try to grow it more modestly. Vegetables are the same way for us. We sold a little more in 2021 because we made sure we had enough after 2020. So to grow a little seems more manageable and sustainable.

“We just need to continue to do a good job in supporting our customers with quality product, great options and customer support. I have always maintained it is our job to grow and supply the products that will help our customers be successful. A successful customer is a happy and satisfied customer that will continue to support our garden centers.” **GP**