

6/1/2024

Relief Valves

John Friel



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It's that time of year when I visit retailers, usually a big box or two and an IGC or two, to compare and contrast. This year, there's a new kid on the block here in PA: Second Chance Plants, a retailer that fits neither of the above familiar categories.

Billed as a "plant and garden clearance outlet," Second Chance is a branch of BloomBox, a home-delivery service. The location, a former used car lot on Lancaster's west side, is unimpressive. But that fits the bill: As the name implies, Second Chance Plants was conceived by owner Dave Zablocki as "a good way to move our seconds and to try out new stuff."

Dave appeared in This Space last year after I met him at a Home and Garden Show. He started BloomBox in his backyard in 2016 and was doing well—and then came the pandemic shutdowns. The business exploded, as in 720% growth, when cabin-fevered homeowners craved the comfort, beauty and satisfaction that only a garden can provide. There are now two locations, in Lancaster and Baltimore, delivering to homes in six states.

He compared BloomBox versus Second Chance as "kind of like Nordstrom versus Nordstrom Rack." It's a pretty good analogy. Nordstrom Rack's motto is "Where style meets savings." Their website advertises discounts up to 70% compared to the mother ship's prices. Second Chance touts 80%. Road front signage near a busy intersection boasts, "Plants from \$1."

Sure enough, there really is a \$1 table, a bench full of plants that look as you'd expect at that price. Some, like frostbitten annuals and beat-up Boston fern baskets, will need a little TLC and patience. Others, like a limp and nearly leafless brugmansia, will need a lot.

By striking contrast, there were also full, well-grown inkberry hollies, *Ilex glabra*. Beautiful shrubs, but lacking proper tagging, they couldn't be included in BloomBox's regular menu.

How has the public responded? "It's been bonkers," Dave said. "The weekend we opened, we had 300 people in the first 40 minutes."

Traffic was good—not that good, but good—when I visited during the third week, with a line six deep at checkout, where many claimed the 5% cash discount.

Second Chance's offering, which evolves week-to-week, included potted plants in a wide range: Shrubs, perennials, annuals, tropicals, succulents, edibles and tall "luxury" mixed containers with surprising ingredients like crotons, and

a personal favorite, Senecio Angel Wings.

I asked Dave if he's gotten flak from area brick-and-mortar nurseries. With a wry chuckle he said several local nursery owners have come through, "not with smiles on their faces." Hateful messages appeared on social media—some vile enough to make him consider legal action.

But Dave feels Second Chance addresses underserved socioeconomic groups, "long ignored by most garden centers" who also "would never shop online. [And] garden centers intimidate people. We're small, upbeat and energetic. We put a little fun into the mix."

Wondering if the discounts might be cannibalizing sales, I asked if his BloomBox customers had discovered the place.

"A few," he said. But "I'd say 70% of the people who come in have never heard of BloomBox."

Not surprisingly, they won't hear about it via BloomBox: The offshoot isn't mentioned on the parent company's website. But there is a Facebook page featuring humorous, kinda snarky videos of Dave touting his newcomers and comparing their prices with the same plants at the nearest big box: "Just \$24.99! Theirs? \$62!" And, yeah, he names names.

Given the location and hours (just four days a week, Thursday – Sunday), the traffic is all local—like one regular whose car is "the first one in the parking lot every Thursday morning," scoping out fresh arrivals.

The concept eclipses the overstock model: Some product was obviously bought in to fill shelves, enhance the offering and spiff up appearances. On a subsequent visit, Dave estimated that actual "seconds" represented maybe 10% of inventory. But that number will grow as BloomBox generates more not-ready-for-prime-time product.

Meanwhile, it looks and feels like an unusually large pop-up shop. Benches and carts were chock-full on Thursday, but Dave said, "By Sunday it'll be really picked through."

He shrugged, "People like a bargain." **GP**

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