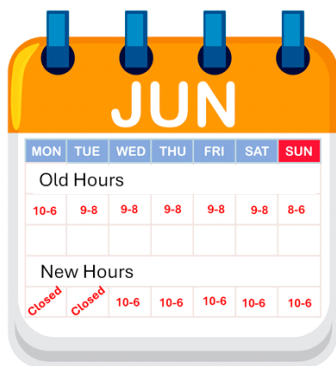


Features

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The Times They Are A-Changin’

Bill McCurry



The Covid epidemic and everyday economic and personal pressures caused a few garden centers to take a new look at their traditional days and hours of operation. The following stories come from across the U.S. and Canada. Each presents a different idea that works for them and that might be meaningful for you and your team.

Lisa Campbell and her husband, Nathan, (Danville Gardens in Danville, Illinois) told us, “July and August are extremely hot. Customers all wanted steep discounts on whatever they bought. We were breaking even at best and burnout was becoming real.” They decided to close for July and August. “Then we looked at the poinsettia

business we had done. With the doorbuster competition and spiraling energy costs, it was another break even season for us, so we reopened for September and October, then closed from November through March. We’re still working when we’re closed, completing maintenance and other chores, and allowing more flex time for family and personal recharging.”

There were adjustments. Lisa and Nathan noted a few superb employees had to leave for full-time work. Some great employees wanted to work two days each week they were open and they have a roster of employees with a variety of shifts. “It’s a stable cadre of people who like the less than full-time work and we’ve gotten our lives back without burnout,” Lisa said.

The biggest lesson they learned was: “Never say we’re closing for July/August.” Customers panicked, thinking Danville Gardens was closing for good. Instead, Danville Gardens say they’re “Taking time for family and working on business improvements, plus planning for the spring.”

Creating Immediacy

Kyle Natorp, CEO of Natorp’s Nursery Outlet in Mason, Ohio, uses the perception of scarcity as an effective marketing tool. Natorp’s grows everything that they sell on their 150 acres, except tropicals. Their retail sales area is 3 acres under cover and 5 acres of open “retail” fields. They call it the “Nursery Outlet” because it’s operated as an outlet store. They closed four of their five retail locations. By focusing on a single location and restricting store sales to 13 weeks in the spring and only seven weeks in the fall, they’ve created intense store traffic. In the spring, Natorp’s is only open five days a week, Wednesday through Sunday. In the fall, the outlet is only open Thursday through Sunday. The 7 p.m. closing time was changed to 5 p.m. These constricted days/hours enhance crowd size,

resulting in things happening and selling out. The condensed hours are more efficient and easier for the team.

Natorp's rearranges the retail area every season. Pots are sold out to bare walls so product is new at each reopening. This creates interest and curiosity among their faithful shoppers. Because the growing range is adjacent to the outlet, parking is almost unlimited. The Growing Staff members are responsible for continually restocking the live goods. Retail shoppers enjoy buying "fresh from the field."

"We will still sell product online during the 32 weeks the retail store is closed. The website shows what's currently available," Kyle said. "Customers can order online and pick up at the store or choose delivery. The landscape department is open year round.

"We tried to retail plants contrary to the natural buying patterns. We found it more effective to double down our efforts when customers are already looking for plants. We're now open when people are eager to buy and closed during those shoulder or off-season times."

Shoulder Season Strategies

Despite Canadian weather conditions that make year-round operation challenging, the need for cash flow continues. Most garden centers don't have to put up with northern Alberta winters. For over 10 years, Debbie Foisy of Deb's Greenhouse in Morinville, Alberta, Canada, has offered customers the ability to pre-order their plants. Originally the pre-order period was November to March, making the production schedule tight. When the closing date was moved up to Valentine's Day, sales continued to grow and the time squeeze lifted.

Deb's will plant, grow and hold plants until the risk of frost has passed. Pickups happen at the end of May or early June. Besides providing winter sales to boost the otherwise frozen cash flow, this guarantees customers will shop at Deb's when the spring thaw finally happens. When they come in for pick up, their order has been prepaid so they feel they have money to spend that day. Deb's once handed out or mailed an October wish book so customers could order in advance. Today, a free book is sent to those who ordered last year. Non-ordering customers can buy the book on Amazon for \$9.65 (CDN). Deb attributes their growth to ease of ordering. Some hot products sold out when the store opened. Disappointed customers were encouraged to pre-order next year.

Deb's has many requests from volunteers who want to work free in the greenhouse. From March until the store's reopening in late April, they allow volunteers to shadow and work with a team member. These volunteers boost the store's social media reach—now 54,000 followers and climbing!

Reconsidering for good reason

JD Boone, owner of Dothan Nurseries in Dothan, Alabama, said, "In the middle of Sunday church services, I would sneak out early and run to the store to get it open for Sunday afternoon customers. I thought that was crazy. When Covid arose, we all began paying more attention to our team and ourselves, including our physical and mental health.

"We decided to go to five-day weeks, Tuesday through Saturday, during the Covid summer. We planned to go back in springtime. As we neared spring we realized the benefits we had discovered being on a company-wide five-day week. Through The Garden Center Group, we asked Sid Raisch what the downside of five-day weeks would be. He said, 'What's to lose? If it doesn't work, go back to six or seven days.' That was all we needed."

Dothan Nurseries has stayed at the five-days week ever since and is delighted with their team's effectiveness and job satisfaction. At the beginning of each week, team members are refreshed and eager to help customers.

JD says while the change was for the team and customers, it also was a boon to him. Nearing 50, he finds it allows him to devote time to his business and his life. "Coming into the office on Mondays, I'm alone and can think and plan without distraction. I can have an intense hour-long phone call without interruption. I 'set the table' for what we'll accomplish in the upcoming week."

When questioned about the advice he would give to other retailers considering a five-day week, JD said, "I only know what works for us. One key is making sure both employees and customers know you're doing this so the team can have a life, rest and enjoy coming to work. This gives your customers the best experience possible. Make sure you publicize the changed hours and the reason for them. Your employees need family and personal time off. We know those two days are a time for the employees to 'check out of this crazy world' and come back happy and rested." If you haven't reviewed your hours/days/months of operations, now is a great time to be objective about maximizing the results for your team. **GP**

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