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A New Normal?

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I've spent all spring, summer and now fall trying to read the financial tea leaves. Needless to say, I'm just as stumped now as I was in spring—economic indicators seem to be all over the place. We may be in a new normal and it can be hard to adjust to those outside pressures. But what I see within the industry is promising, depending on where you're looking.

There are some keys I've seen to success in this new normal: understanding how your customer shops and buys, sourcing product that has less tariff pressure, and seeing the whole picture in terms of what the end game is for consumers. What do I mean by that last one? If you can better understand the ultimate goal of what the customer is looking to get out of (for example, that bunch of perennials they just bought), then you can sell more of them.

What I'm seeing more than ever is that retail is changing quickly. While consumers still love to shop in store, they want to research products online, which means your digital presence is more vital than ever. They want to be educated before they enter the store and if they're not going to your website they're going to somewhere else to do it (possibly Home Depot, Lowe's, Walmart or Amazon).

That's not to say your in-store presence shouldn't be a focus, it absolutely should be. Another key I've seen to success this year is covered shopping. With weather being the largest factor in spring sales, this could be a game changer.

It's also a challenge now to get customers to your website at all, thanks to AI search results providing information without pushing them to a website. Another "new normal" I'm watching is the disparity between wealthy shoppers and the rest, about 80% of America. According to Moody's, the wealthiest 20% of America is fueling growth, while the spending of the rest is in line with inflation. This has been happening for a while, apparently, since the last quarter of 2022. Have you noticed this in your sales?

In this issue, we have a number of stories that can help with addressing this new normal. For example, consultant Dave Williams shares the inside look at the considerations made for helping South Street Gardens create its new modern retail location after being solely a landscape operation.

Then we cover the highlights of the 2026 Garden Trends Report from Garden Media Group, now in its 25th year. The report hits at what consumers are looking for and can be helpful in creating a game plan for next year. And speaking of game plans, check out Clint Albin's dissection of what OpenAI's brand new Instant Checkout could mean for your business. This is a continuation of our look at AI at retail, so if you've missed those, you can go back to stories in the September and October issues at greenprofit.com to catch up.

And, finally, get some inspo for next year from the Garden Center Group Fall Event's tour, where I took in five very different garden centers in one day. If we're looking at how to pull in consumers, there were a couple of that really stood out: Homewood Nursery & Garden Center, nestled in a beautifully serene setting of pine trees; Fairview Garden Center with its focus on family and fun; and DeWayne's, a truly artful example of merchandising and creating a destination.

So while there are outside pressures, I think the lesson here is to focus on what you can control, which is your costs, your products, how you present and sell to the customer, and what you mean to them. **GP**