

Features

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An Unexpected Response

Jennifer Polanz

To mask or not to mask. Plexiglass cash wrap barriers. Drive-thru garden retail and curbside pickup. Copious amounts of hand sanitizer and disinfectant spray. Essential business determinations. Millions of new gardener questions. And sheer mental, physical and emotional exhaustion. These are part of the new reality that defined this spring—a spring like no other.

We wanted to mark this season transformed by COVID-19 with a series of thoughtful essays (which we asked our authors to write during the busiest part of the season and for which we profusely apologize to them). We reached out to a number of experts in garden retail and consumer horticulture to get their thoughts on where we were and what the future may bring. We divided them up into three groups: garden retail's path forward, the role online sales played this year and in the future, and how we keep the new gardeners we saw clamoring for product this spring. Here are their thoughts.

What does the path forward look like for garden retail in a COVID world?



As luck has it, “Restless Gardening Syndrome” is here to stay.

In the “perfect storm,” when spring began unfolding and COVID-19 prohibited money-sucking and time-sucking fillers of life (sporting events, eating out, recreational shopping, etc.), consumers had few places to go and more time to do things in pursuit of this induced and sustained impulsivity to garden. Following this perfect storm, will there be a wave to ride to more opportunity?

I’ve always said, “Luck is when Preparation meets Opportunity” and the luck of the IGC is squarely anchored in the level of opportunity each one received and how prepared they were to engage it. With respect for those who aren’t feeling so lucky from this spring, your opportunity wasn’t there, but there’s plenty of opportunity to grab hold of and make your own.

As in every other time of unusual stress, humans seek solace from current events with new activities and pursuits of nurturing plants. Typical spring fever comes and goes in a flash, but this protracted event (now extended even longer) is long enough that new gardening habits will form out of it.

Herbs & veggies—Consumers are “hungrier” to veggie garden for food security after seeing empty shelves and pictures of them empty at the grocery store in the media for weeks on end. Prepare for an even better opportunity Spring 2021.

Houseplant parenting—Houseplants have been and continue to serve as a “gateway” to vegetable gardening. The best opportunity is to double down on your investment in an even better Houseplant Store-Within-Your-Store and promote your destination.

Staycation—Focus on inspiration for creating private spaces for entertaining family and friends looking to reconnect in their own safe-spaces.

Work from home—Many people will continue to work from home and will need better views from their windows, and outdoor office areas with shade, and privacy screening, and noise filtering. Share those ideas and examples of DIY-level planting projects to accomplish them.

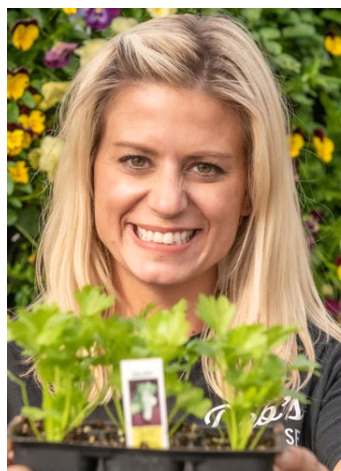
Workout at home—Exercise is good for the mind and there’s nowhere better than gardening to get it. Share ideas like a backyard yoga platform, a stretching bar or other simple home exercise equipment like chin-up bars that you see in parks.

Escape at home—People need to escape into solitude on a regular basis, in between trips to the beach or mountains. Ideas like a Zen garden, secret garden and labyrinth.

Following a typical spring, I expect the same percentage of increase during peak spring weeks to carry through at the same percentage the rest of the year. Even at this years’ record-breaking spring sales levels this could happen. I usually expect each year’s total sales to become the foundation of sales to grow from the following year. This year my expectation for Spring 2021 will be more tempered. I’m not ready to declare an expectation and I’m thinking it will be more like 25% of the 2020 increase.

—*Sid Raisch, owner of Horticultural Advantage and consultant with The Garden Center Group*

What role does online ordering play in the future of garden retail?



We’re over the peak of a ferocious spring. Exhausting. Mentally and physically. We’ve almost emptied our garden center, in half the time it normally takes.

Before that.

Lockdown.

March 2020: We already have an online store and we’re using it to sell houseplants and pottery, and so when the pandemic became really real and everything went into lockdown, we converted all our spring plants to our online store.

Sales came in steady, customers pre-ordering everything possible. Our online sales paid the bills—it was an eye-opener; our website report tells us that 83% of our online shoppers are new customers. Of them, 83% never purchased anything through our website in the past (wheels turning). Potential ... online sales have potential. It’s not without its headaches and frustration, though. We don’t have all the kinks worked out.

Pulling orders is slow, it’s tedious, we’re disorganized and training the team to pick orders isn’t easy. Making sure

we pulled enough off the retail floor has been a challenge; not having enough space to hold the picked orders is frustrating, too. The demand for online ordering will increase from our customers. This year raised the bar. At pick-up time, we've had nothing but praise from customers—they love this service as an option—so many thank yous. Pulling one of every type of tomato we grow isn't efficient; there must be better ways of doing things. We have time to figure that out.

The future of online ordering will be decided by the growers willing to take the chance to continue it. We'll continue with our custom preorders and we'll expand our usual offering to more of the perennial, tree and shrub stock we bring in, as well as my daughter's Envee Kits, which were a hit.

Our long-term goal is to sell collections or packages of plants online. A few examples are the Envee Kits or an English garden package.

Successes:

- Customers are willing to shop online
- Customers are spending money on plants
- It was hard, but we did it

Room for Improvement:

- More original photos for the website
- Minimum sale needs to be implemented or an efficiency to offset picking time
- Clear and concise area to pick orders from
- Holding area
- We were very precise in the product/variety/color

Flops:

- Not enough staff to pick orders and maintain regular tasks at peak times
- Some customers never show up (how long do we hold pre-paid product for?)

Takeaway: Customers are very willing to purchase all types of plants online. Growers that take the plunge to accommodate will be industry visionaries and well rewarded by customers. Work out the kinks, train your team, get a holding area, take lots of original photos, create a webstore or use a third party to sell.

We'll go back to selling houseplants and pottery online after the spring rush.

—Debbie Foisy, owner Deb's Greenhouse, Morinville, Alberta, Canada

What role does online ordering play in the future of garden retail?



During the COVID pandemic, retail creativity has been tested and re-tested more times than any of us truly had energy for. Like a beach ball, we blew up ideas around contactless shopping, social media advertising and adjusted scheduling, only for new guidelines and state orders to quickly deflate the details hours later. It was unprecedented and confusing. At the end of the day, we were all just trying to salvage the lifeline that was our spring season.

As we settle in for the long haul of what we can only admit to be a transformation era in our retail industry, we revisit the only selling platform that best abides by ever changing mandates—the Internet. Our family garden center launched an e-commerce website in 2017 as an extension of our floral arrangement page—if we can sell floral arrangements online, why can't we sell everything else? The process was tedious, slow and somewhat unrewarding. I recall only 14 online plant orders that first year. The more robust the project became, the more advertising we put behind it and the sales certainly, but still gradually, increased. Fast forward into the COVID spring months, we were able to take in 1,500 online orders and add 10% to our bottom line. Like many others in the industry, there were late nights and frenzied days of constant configuration and updating, but we were grateful to have had the basic platform established.

As we look optimistically into the future, it's critical that we make place for functioning websites and e-commerce. No one knows where the pandemic may take us in following seasons, but there's certainly security in having an online platform ready to go, ready to sell. Given the duration of the pandemic, people have settled into new habits and one of these habits is online shopping. The trend was undoubtedly strengthening already, so it's most logical and advantageous to jump on board when people are primed with the idea. If I could offer two pieces of advice in these three short years of online sales:

- Bring everyone to your website first: Whether you promote on social media, newsletter or radio, bring everyone to your website first. From there, let them link to other social media accounts, emails, directions or blog articles. As you build your e-commerce, customers will witness your progress and shop along the way.
- Link your POS and e-com for live inventory: If you sell online or over the phone while also open in-store, you may have run into the problem of overselling. If you link the two platforms, something that sells in store will automatically disappear online and vice versa. It'll make you largely accountable for inventory, but there will be far less manual work in updating changes.

As we plan and budget ahead, let's make space for this essential online program. Offering online sales allows customers to scroll mindlessly or intentionally, learn or indulge, shop day or night. The opportunities are vast and continue to grow—let's grow with it.

—*Madison Williams, Boulevard Flower Gardens, South Chesterfield, Virginia*

How do we keep the customers we gained this year who are new to gardening?



Our National Garden Bureau (NGB) members are reporting online orders of seeds, plants and related goods were three to four times the norm this spring. That means a lot of new gardeners are trying to garden for the first time! Educating these newbies is the mission of NGB.

Making gardeners successful is key to retaining them for future years. Provide good information. Don't make gardening seem too difficult. Give tips for success, but don't overwhelm. Don't garden-shame on social media (it's true ... we see way too much of that). Make sure the information is easy to access. And above all, sell GOOD products at the RIGHT time!

In March, we did a relaunch of Victory Gardening, calling it Victory Gardening 2.0, and it really took off. There was such an interest in the topic and the related questions that followed. Our first blog post got more than 4,000 shares on Facebook alone. So we followed it up with additional topics in the Victory Gardening 2.0 theme, such as planting tips, container gardening, raised beds, pollinator gardens, etc. Time and time again, the points we made about knowing your growing zone and your last frost date were the biggest "A-HA" moments for readers.

In April, we launched a series of Ask the Expert posts on social media to further help new gardeners. Each week we feature a new plant class and funnel our reader's questions to our NGB member experts to answer. It's been such a resounding success we'll continue this series all summer. We also create blog posts and e-newsletters from this content to reach even more new gardeners. Retailers are welcome to use this content in their communications as well ... at no charge.

While NGB educates gardeners, All-America Selections is committed to finding the best varieties for gardeners to grow in their home gardens. AAS Winners are thoroughly vetted by our expert judges across North America ensuring they're proven garden performers. Choosing AAS Winners will help new gardeners be successful and successful gardeners will want to continue gardening. AAS, our judges and our ambassadors always stress that starting with a good product (an AAS Winner) is the key to getting good results.

In conclusion, we must concentrate on making these new gardeners successful and giving encouragement when things don't work out as planned. There's always next year!

—Diane Blazek, Executive Director of National Garden Bureau and All-America Selections

How do we keep the customers we gained this year who are new to gardening?



Early Pre-season Selling Observations

In speaking with many retailers from many states, the one constant input from owners is that they noticed a huge swing in new customers. Early on, it was critical to develop a selling strategy to provide curbside pickup or delivery of goods to customers both old and new. The success of “free” delivery services within a short radius of stores brought an added value service that no box store could provide. It was an easy, no-contact transaction that may have convinced the consumer to venture down a different path for future spring needs.

Too Little, Too Late

The biggest change in consumer retail attitudes is seeing how the box stores reacted to servicing its customer. Restricted store counts of patrons, single “entrance door” only into the main store, and more importantly, poor plant sale options prior to Mother’s Day Weekend contributed to a disappointed gardener.

Help was limited with a smaller store staff by the numbers. Even seeing the nursery adjustments that box stores eventually made, their quality was a bit better, the tables were spaced out a lot more, however, the lines to the registers were still very long. The consumer might be a bit frustrated and intimidated. Sourcing what the consumer wanted and not finding it in the box stores pointed them towards the independent garden center for new options. It’s about time—welcome back!

Service with a (Hidden) Smile

Garden centers have adapted well to new footsteps into their stores by increasing spacing where possible, adding registers (and handheld iPads) to move lines quickly and by keeping their stock freshly displayed. Store signs have been added to require wearing of masks, limit handling of goods unless buying and even subtle nudges to maintain social distancing. The buying atmosphere is different. The results are surprisingly positive in sales.

Most garden centers suspended the curbside pickup simply because they couldn’t afford the manpower needed to sustain it. It took a maximum effort to pick the item, stage it, contact the customer to notify it was ready and then wait until their arrival. With bag goods, it was easy. With live plants, it was and will remain a challenge. The priority of time goes towards receiving plants, watering plants, reordering plants and sanitizing carts upon their return from parking areas. Many retailers were quickly running out of plants, shopping carts, and unfortunately, parking.

Minimal Contact, Maximum Knowledge

Our industry should continue to pride itself on our abilities to sell our customers the right products and plants to be successful. The major difference between independent garden centers and box stores is our willingness to interact both verbally and silently through great signage. Teaching and preaching gardening success.

The secondary difference is our selection of plants and products. We are second to none. Many consumers only know of home centers for gardening needs ... until they can’t find what they were looking for. These new customers now finally exploring the independents are seeing what’s truly available in selection and service. Believe it or not, we’ve captured more than their wallets for this spring ... we may have captured their gardening souls for the future.

—John Johnston, Retail Education Manager, Griffin Greenhouse Supplies