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Learn From 2020 When Planning for 2021

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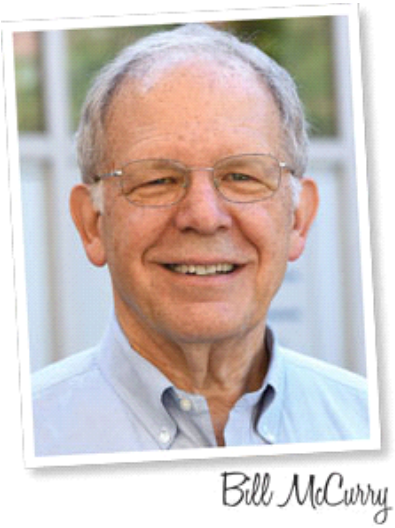

Many New Year's resolutions are in the wastebasket by January 2, but COVID-19 has wreaked havoc, causing garden centers to learn about and commit to new actions and focus. This month, four pros tell us what's working for them.

Smith's Acres (Niantic, Connecticut) is a garden center, grower and food stand, focusing on local food, local service and locally grown products.

Owner Teri Smith says, "My first resolution is to take AT LEAST one day off each week. I resolved that last year, but never quite made it happen.

"We'll be open three days a week throughout this winter. In 40 years, we've never been open during the winter. We've done a lot of new curbside produce orders. We've seen the curbside requests increase as cooler weather arrives and our doors are closed. This community supported us, so opening was the least I could do for our friends and neighbors.

"We've gone to a one-way in, one-way-out floor plan, however, we're moving our registers closer to the exits. To facilitate future rearrangements, they're not bolted down.

"We planted 1,000 daffodils on our corner. They'll bring a needed a smile once this winter is over."

Kuhlmann's Greenhouse Garden Market (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada) started with a Pick-Your-Own-Farm-Produce stand. While retaining fresh produce and food items, Kuhlmann's now encompasses 300,000 sq. feet of greenhouses, a florist and a retail store for locally grown trees, shrubs and plants.

Third generation co-owner Anita McDonald says, "We've used the knowledge gained from the pandemic. We know the spring season basics and we expect a repeat of last spring. We'll be growing at full capacity again. We're growing tomatoes for sale starting in June.

"Houseplants, tropicals and succulents have been extremely popular with the indoor garden customers. Since March it's been difficult to keep our plant benches full of indoor plants. This will probably continue as long as families are home-bound.

"All manner of annuals, 6-packs, 4-in. potted geraniums, shrubs, roses, hanging baskets, food-producing seeds and bedding plants with tomatoes, herbs and other started plants will be in high demand. We expect to see many first-

time gardeners along with repeat customers.

“Soil mixes, composts and manures seem to fly out. Many new gardeners are planting container gardens. We’ve ordered heavily so we have extra stock. Gardening tools will again be a big item.

“The ‘Buy Local’ theme has helped us. Greenhouses and garden centers have been deemed ‘essential service’ in Alberta, so we’re fortunate our doors can be open. We keep in constant contact with our trade association, which quickly lobbies local and provincial government if there are lockdown threats.

“We have wide garden center aisles, lots of disinfectants, hand-sanitizing stations, social distancing and mandatory masks, keeping our staff and customers as safe as possible.

“We’re planning to hire extra staff for orderly customer flow. Because many students weren’t in school in April/May, they were available to fill in where needed. We’ll need the same staffing in 2021, along with a team to handle curbside pick-ups and online orders. We need parking lot attendants, door monitoring and staff to keep carts cleaned and sanitized.

“Crowd control is important and challenging. We configured an outside line-up system. We own 60 identical greenhouse shopping carts. When they’re in use, customers wait patiently until one becomes available. Because we were ordered to close our public washrooms, we’re installing parking lot Port-a-Potties and wash stations.

“Even in season we shortened operating hours to 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Seniors lined up at 8:00 a.m. are usually let in at 8:30 for extra shopping time.”

Anita concluded, “We’re a blessed bunch. We’ll do everything in our power to keep our family, our staff and our customers safe.”

Danville Gardens (Danville, Illinois) dates back to 1910. Nathan and Lisa Campbell acquired it in 1993, expanding it to 100,000 sq. ft. of growing/retail space. Today, they grow 90% of what they sell.

Lisa says, “We think one of the major takeaways from last spring is to simplify, streamlining varieties and educating new customers about tried-and-true favorites so they feel comfortable and return. Additional staff ensures better customer service.

“Instead of late March, we opened in mid-April when the weather was more suitable for planting. This year we’ll cancel our popular Ladies’ Luncheon because we need that time for making displays and better preparing the greenhouse.

“Being so seasonal we were able to close earlier so our staff had limited exposure to customers.

“We accepted an offer to sell our seasonal store location in Champaign, Illinois. We’re going to push for the customers to come to Danville where they’ll see how much more we have to offer. We’ll definitely focus our efforts, resulting in higher average transactions and less stress on staff (and owners) with only one larger location.”

Deb’s Greenhouse (Morinville, Alberta, Canada) is operated by Deb Foisy, a Young Retailer of the Year finalist. Deb told us, “We switched gears in April. As a team whenever possible, we said, ‘Yes’ while the world was saying, ‘No.’ We want our customers to leave smiling.

“Here, customers can forget about the pandemic and feel relatively normal. That’s why we expanded our offerings by adding the Secret Garden and a new seed line. The 7,000-sq. ft. Secret Garden increases the customer count capacity. It offers a chance for adventure, normalcy, free-play, or just running or sitting in the sun to fight COVID-19 fatigue.”

Now here’s your New Year’s Challenge. Review your team. Identify your best employee and nominate that person

for Green Profit's Young Retailer Award (information on pages 45 and 46 in this issue). If you can't find someone worthy of nomination, admit you should be replaced by a professional manager. That sounds harsh, but your job as a leader is to build and recognize people. Start a program to build a team that is award-worthy. Make it happen in 2021.

Happy New Year! **GP**

Bill McCurry would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169