

Features

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Winter Money Maker

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January often means a slowdown for most retailers, but wintertime means things are just heating up at Four Seasons Greenhouse and Nursery in Dolores, Colorado. Since 2013, the garden center has hosted a winter farmers market that keeps business flowing and associates employed through the coldest, darkest months of the year.

When owners Vic and Gail Vanik started the farmers market, they saw it as a good way to sell the produce they were growing in their greenhouses during the off season. It has since expanded to include more than 30 vendors (during non-pandemic times) who sell everything from local eggs and honey to baked goods and craft items.

Pictured: Four Seasons Greenhouse & Nursery co-owner Vic Vanik shows off produce he grows and sells

at their winter farmers market. Photo Credit: Four Seasons Greenhouse & Nursery.

All of Four Seasons' produce is grown in containers, Vic says. In the market's early days, they focused on veggies like tomatoes and lettuce, but now they offer a slew of fresh produce, including arugula, microgreens, spinach, kohlrabi and cabbage, to name a few.

"It's gotten to the point where people come to us to get the stuff we grow rather than going to the grocery store," Vic says of the market, which runs Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. November through mid-March. "Although it's more expensive, it tastes far superior to anything you get from the store."

Vendors who want to participate in the market pay a \$125 fee for the season, which secures them an 8-ft. by 8-ft. booth each Saturday. If a regular vendor can't make it on any given Saturday, Four Seasons will offer the booth space to a temporary vendor for \$15 a week, which helps keep the market full, Vic says.

In addition, Four Seasons brings in live entertainment each week. Acts have included Celtic music groups, country and rock bands, and holiday performers during the Christmas season, among others.

The pandemic, of course, changed everything. Vic says the final market of the season last winter, right around the time businesses started to shut down in March, wasn't great in terms of foot traffic and sales.

Though business has picked up again this winter, the market is down to approximately 25 vendors to ensure everyone stays socially distanced and safe. In addition, in late 2020, new COVID-19 regulations limited the market's vendors and customers to 25% of the total building capacity. As a result, Four Seasons decided to cancel the live entertainment to make more room for customers.

Despite these changes, the winter market is a boon to the bottom line. Around the holiday season, customers who come for the market commonly also grab a poinsettia, wreath or Christmas tree, Vic notes. And as spring approaches, they might pick up seed packs and potting soil along with their fresh vegetables. Not to mention, the margins on the produce Four Seasons grows itself are in the 90-plus percent range.

"Our greenhouses are full to capacity and we're making money," Vic says. "And we sell food, which really kind of weaves you into the web of the local economy in a different way than a garden center does because foodies are not necessarily the people who come buy flowers, perennials and trees the rest of the year." **GP**

Want to Start a Market?

As part of the Garden Center Group, Four Seasons Greenhouse and Nursery has launched a consultation program to help other garden retailers start their own farmers markets. Retailers who sign up will learn about what to grow, how to set up and promote a market, price points, and more. For more information, visit www.thegardencentergroup.com.

About This Series

In 2021, we will feature a different garden retailer each month from The Garden Center Group's Best Practices group. These retailers achieved 10% or more profit in the previous year (the first couple of features are from the 2019 Best Practices Group). The Garden Center Group offers Weekly Department Reviews, as well as an Annual P&L Study for those clients who wish to participate. Both are actionable reports that retailers can use to benchmark off of and grow sales in specific categories. Find out more at www.thegardencentergroup.com.