

Positive signs for garden centers

VISITED recently with the principals of several retail garden centers to hear what challenges and opportunities they have experienced over the last few years.

I met with Mark Bigej from Al's Garden Center, which has retail locations in Woodburn, Sherwood and Gresham; Lee Powell from Garland Nursery in Corvallis; Ken Whitten from Portland Nursery; and Lori Vollmer from Garden Fever in Portland.

Everyone said 2015 was a banner year for retail sales and 2016 was even slightly better. While it's great to hear that business has been thriving, I wanted to dig deeper and learn what trends they foresee for the future.

More men are shopping

Some noted that the gender of shoppers has been changing. Some years ago, Jack Bigej estimated retail garden center shoppers were about 85 percent female and 15 percent male. Lee Powell agreed that this was the case in the past, but he said that today the ratio is almost 50:50.

Both Lori Vollmer and Ken Whitten estimated the ratio as about 60 percent female and 40 percent male. Mark Bigej said that, while the majority of shoppers are still female, he believes that male shop-

pers are much more involved in decision making than they have been in the past.

Organic is taking over

Many noted a strong movement toward organic products. Up until a few years ago, most garden centers didn't have an organic section, or if they had one, the selection was minimal.

Today, organics account for about 50 percent of sales at Al's; at Portland Nursery and Garland, about 80 percent of shelf space is devoted to organic pest control.

Lori Vollmer said she has never stocked many chemical products and each year the number becomes less. She also mentioned that the overwhelming majority of younger customers has no interest in chemical products.

Ken Whitten commented that customers have been very vocal against neonicotinoids, based on the negative news about their effect on honey bees. Portland Nursery has taken an extra step by asking their growers to eliminate neonicotinoids from their growing operations; they are close to achieving 100 percent of this goal.

Pollinators are popular

Pollinator-friendly plants have become a huge category for all these garden cen-



Mike Darcy

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ters. Powell said several years ago, homeowners would specifically say they did not want plants around their house that would attract bees. Now the opposite is true. Vollmer also said pollinator plants were very important and she plans to increase the space allotted to this group in 2017.

Plants that attract butterflies are also big sellers. For example, Whitten said he had difficulty keeping *Asclepias* (milkweed) in stock. No sooner would a shipment arrive and he'd be sold out within a day.

Containers and edibles are hot commodities

Container gardening continues to increase at a rapid pace. With many gardeners having smaller lots, container use on decks and patios has become exceedingly popular. Bigej said that container sales continue to climb along with other outdoor gardening items.

Space-challenged gardeners are figuring out creative ways to plant vegetables and herbs in containers. Vertical gardening is trending up, pun intended. Vining plants such as cucumbers grow well on wire structures at the back of a container, with leafy vegetables growing in the front.

All the garden centers reported that vegetable starts have been strong sellers for the past few years and they expected that trend to continue. Powell said just a few years ago no one wanted to eat kale and now it is all the rage.

Tomatoes are the most popular home vegetable garden plant, but there is growing interest in new varieties. Tried-and-true tomato varieties continue



What I'm Hearing

to dominate sales, but there is demand for tomato plants developed specifically for container growing.

With the smaller lot sizes that many homeowners have today, there is new interest in fruit trees grown on dwarf rootstock. Powell said that sales of espaliered fruit trees have seen a sizeable increase in the past several years.

Gardeners are also interested in growing crops that are relatively easy, which has created demand for berry plants, specifically blueberries. Whitten expected Portland Nursery to stock 30–35 different types of blueberries next year.

Going native

Many garden centers reported having created a special section for native plants.



This category often requires some explanation to novice gardeners, however, because native plants do not necessarily do well in the garden.

Home is for houseplants

Whitten said he has doubled the space devoted to houseplants in the past year. Vollmer also mentioned the trend, as

well as “fairy” (aka tiny) gardens; for instance, one sedum in a 4-inch pot.

The future

When customers shop is changing. Powell said weekend business still produces the largest volume of sales, but more people are shopping during the week.

All the garden centers I polled are looking forward to 2017, with a few caveats.

Whitten said that weather is always an issue, while Vollmer noted the difficulty in determining what customers will want.

Bigej said that fall sales have been up over last year and he expects this trend to continue. Powell, too, is “bullish on the future.”

On that optimistic note, I wish you all a very happy, prosperous New Year. ☺

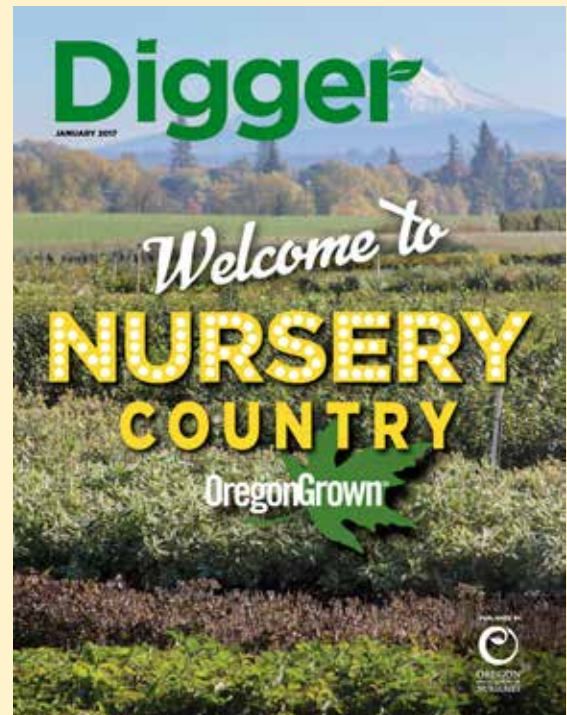
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