

Ready, set, spring!

IF EVER THERE was doubt that the retail garden center business is heavily weather related, this year should prove the test. This past winter, we had temperatures in the teens, heavy snowfall that lasted for days, ice on the roadways causing many schools to close and plants to freeze, heavy winds and record rainfall. These conditions are hardly encouraging to gardeners.

I have heard that the movie business will get a spike in attendance when it is cold and rainy, but the opposite is true for garden centers. They need sunny days to bring in customers.

I spent my teenage years in Tucson, Arizona, where I worked in a small retail garden center. The spring weather there is more consistent than it is where I live in Western Oregon, and while we would be very busy on a weekend, it was nothing in comparison to a sunny weekend here after weeks of rain. After moving to Oregon, I can remember being shocked at the empty shelves in a garden center on a Monday after a sunny weekend!

Last year we were fortunate to have an early spring with warm, sunny days early in the season, which allowed people to start their garden season early. This provided brisk early season sales. This year it seems to be the opposite with many gardeners, including myself. I am somewhat resistant to buying plants and then having to dig in soil that is saturated with water.

We know that the sun will appear eventually, although it may be much later in the season than we would like. But whenever that weekend arrives, the garden center must be ready with shelves fully stocked with plants and cashiers available to handle the crowds. This is a very difficult situation for a garden center as the shelves must be fully stocked, the plants must look healthy and speedy checkout is essential. But exactly when this ideal weekend will arrive is always somewhat of a mystery.

In recent visits with personnel from various garden centers, here are some of the topics they discussed in preparation

for this spring and their plans to be ready for hopefully multiple sunny weekends.

Color & conifers

I do not think you can have too much color to welcome your customers. With the gloomy, rainy days we have had, gardeners are going to be looking for color. They need blooming plants that will provide instant color for containers on their deck or patio.

With the cold winter we had, customers are going to need replacements for those tender or semi-hardy plants that did not survive. Customer service employees need to be prepared to offer suggestions for replacements.

Dwarf and slow-growing conifers continue to be popular, and this cat-



Pinus 'Chief Joseph' provides a bright spot of winter color. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY



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egory is increasing. Gardeners are beginning to realize that having some evergreen plants in a mixed border will give a nice pop of color during the winter months. Garden centers are also realizing this and displaying conifers in more prominent locations than in past years.

Be sure to offer some choices of color and include some that have tones of yellow and gold in their needles. Many dwarf conifers also make excellent plant choices for a deck, patio or balcony, and some will tolerate quite a bit of shade.

Birds, bees & butterflies

This is a huge category that is rapidly increasing. With media reports lamenting the decline of bees and butterflies, gardeners want to step up and help pollinators by planting what they can to help reverse this decline. There are many pollinator-friendly plants to offer.

With regard to birds, while many gardeners feed an assortment of birds, hummingbirds draw the most attention. Many people ask me specifically for plant suggestions that will attract hummingbirds.

Native plants can also nicely fit into this category. Many are attractive choices for a home garden and will also attract native wildlife.

Low-water plants

Even with all the winter rain, many gardeners are looking for plants that require little or no summer water. There are many to choose from and often these will be new plants to novice gardeners. Some low-water plants can be found [»](#)

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Below: A monarch butterfly larvae feeds on *Asclepias speciosa* (showy milkweed), a Pacific Northwest native. PHOTO BY LORI VOLLMER, GARDEN FEVER!

in the native plant category, while others also fall under pollinator-friendly.

Both *Arctostaphylos* and *Mahonia* can merge into several categories. They are native, they attract bees and birds, and they have low water requirements. When established, they can survive quite well with no supplemental irrigation. They are also attractive plants in the home landscape. Some varieties of *Arctostaphylos* and *Mahonia* bloom very early in the year and provide an excellent source of natural food for hummingbirds.

Organic vegetables

Several garden center personnel said they thought vegetable start sales might have reached a peak, but it has not happened. The increase in sales is not quite what it was a few years ago, but the demand is certainly still there.

Organic seems to be the key word here — many gardeners will only buy starts labeled as such.

Be ready for a surge of sales on vegetable starts that can be planted in early spring. As the season progresses, be prepared for demand of not only the well-known tomatoes, but also more unusual varieties. It seems gardeners always want to try a new tomato.



As I look out my window, I see a rainy day and some sun-breaks, which are very welcome. We should soon be getting more and longer sun-breaks, and then the sunny days will arrive and garden centers will be bustling with gardeners all wanting to get out and plant something. Don't disappoint them.

In times like this, the Boy Scout motto comes to mind: "Be prepared." ©

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