

Current trends at the garden center

IT SHOULD COME as no surprise to those who know me, or read this column, that I like to visit garden centers! Just walking around to look at the plants and talk with some of the personnel — whether they are salespeople, managers, owners, or customers — it is a very enjoyable time. It is a rare visit when I do not see a new plant, flower color or form. I always learn something new.

Recently, I visited several garden centers in the Portland, Oregon, metro area to check on what is happening.

Garden centers are extremely dependent upon the weather for bringing in customers. With the cold wet weather of late winter and early spring, sales were down this year. Then in April, when the sun came out, we had beautiful spring days and customers flocked to the garden centers.

Whereas sales had been down, I am now hearing that garden centers have caught up. With the weather forecast, they are expecting robust business to continue throughout the spring.

There are two things I wanted to know, however. What are people buying? And what questions are they asking?

Strong interest in houseplants

The houseplant boom is still going and is showing no sign of slowing down. Initially the house plants trend was thought to be a winter sales booster, but we have seen that the boost continues when winter is certainly over.

One garden center manager told me that the old-fashioned, split-leaf philodendron is a huge seller. This particular garden center offers them in a five-gallon size. They sell out immediately.

For many young people living in condominiums and apartments, houseplants provide a way they can still connect with nature, even with little or no outdoor space. One manager told me that some of her young customers refer to their individual houseplants by name! She was surprised to learn that, but the practice is now quite common.

Perhaps with no partner and no pets, a houseplant can be a good roommate. It doesn't talk back!

A plant for indoors and out

Citrus plants have also become quite popular. Planted in a container, they can be taken indoors or moved into a garage when



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the temperatures go down to freezing or below, and then taken back outdoors. They make excellent container plants for a deck or patio because of their fragrant flowers and fruit.

Citrus plants thrive in hot weather and are perfect for a hot sunny space. The Meyer lemon is probably the most popular of all container-grown citrus plants. Citrus plants have varying degrees of hardiness, and some will even withstand some frost.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my citrus plant. I have a Calamondin in a container. It is a citrus plant with fruit that looks like a tiny orange. My plant has naturally grown into a round-shaped, small tree with very fragrant flowers and the tiny orange fruit.

I have had this plant for more than 10 years. Every winter, I move it into the garage. As the plant has grown, I have continually moved it into a larger pot, making it increasingly difficult to move around.

This past winter, I left it outside because the pot had become too heavy to move and there was not a large space in our garage to store it. I thought it would surely die with the cold weather and I would just remember the pleasure it gave me for many years.

Imagine my surprise to discover that it was untouched by the frost and cold weather, even though it was in an open, unprotected area. Now that it survived, it can continue to provide me with fragrant flowers and ornamental fruit!

Terrariums and tomatoes

If you cannot garden outside, then do it inside. This is exactly the experience that **>>**



WHAT I'M HEARING

Previous page: Long-stem roses are a colorful feature of an exhibition garden.

Top: Grafted tomatoes are popular items for sale at garden centers. **Bottom:** Houseplant sales continue to thrive into the spring season.

PHOTOS BY RICH BAER

terrariums can provide and they continue to be good sellers.

An added bonus with terrariums is the accessories that go along with them. Of course, these accessories can provide year-round sales. One garden center salesperson told me that he had expected terrarium sales to slack off in the spring and summer, but that has not been the case.

It is probably no surprise that tomato plants continue to be a top seller for homeowners planting a vegetable garden. Grafted tomatoes have become increasingly good sellers and even though the retail price might be double that of non-grafted, customers buy them.

Even gardeners with very limited space — such as a patio, deck, or balcony — want to grow tomatoes. This means that garden centers have another hot commodity.

Looking for the organic label

Organically grown plants, especially vegetables, continue to be something that customer ask about. Many may not know exactly what the label “organic grown” means, but they perceive that it means grown without pesticides and thus, it is more natural.

Heirloom tomatoes continues to sell briskly. It is doubtful that most customers know what an heirloom tomato is, other than the fact that it has been grown in earlier times and has not been modified. The word “heirloom” has a pleasant connotation that



just begs consumers to buy.

While most customers cannot pronounce neonicotinoids, they have read or heard about them, and in a very negative fashion. Publicity on how they are absorbed into plants and can kill honeybees and other pollinators is a negative talking point even for nonorganic gardeners.

One garden center salesperson told me that she has had customers even refer to them by the abbreviated name of “neonic.” Her customers want to be certain that the plants they buy have not been treated with them.

Another good year for roses

Rose sales continue to be strong, and the long-stem hybrid tea rose is always a good seller. Customers often question the disease resistance of roses. More and more disease-resistant roses are being introduced each year.

In recent years, shrub roses have become enormously popular. New flower colors (both single and double) are constantly being introduced. Usually shrub roses — while not looking like the classic long stem rose — bloom most of the season. More importantly, most do not need spraying for common rose diseases such as black spot, rust or powdery mildew.



A healthy future

What I'm hearing is that gardening, in some fashion, continues to be a very popular pastime. I do not see or hear any sign that it is diminishing. In fact, many schools are now creating gardens. There, students can learn how plants are grown and the nutritional value of fruits and vegetables, as well as the value and necessity of pollinators.

Perhaps we are looking at the next generation of gardeners. If schools, parents, the community and garden centers continue to enthusiastically encourage our youth and all other gardeners, the future for all of us is looking healthy. ☺

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