

Gardening interest enters full bloom

IN MY LAST COLUMN (June 2020), I wrote about some of the many changes that garden centers have had to make during the COVID-19 pandemic. The good news is that it appears that most garden centers managed to adapt to these new requirements.

Since the COVID-19 situation is not abating, an appropriate follow-up would be to report on how the overall garden center business fared in the spring of 2020. If things continue as they are now, perhaps sharing changes that worked might be beneficial for

other garden centers.

While visiting gardens and talking with gardeners in my neighborhood, I noted that there was a high level of gardening activity, much greater than in previous years.

People were creating vegetable gardens in the front of their homes where they had not been any in prior years. There were more flower baskets and colorful annuals than ever before.

Tangentially, more people were walking throughout our neighborhood, and since many gardeners were working in

front of their homes, it created an environment for conversation. I have had established homeowners tell me that they have met more neighbors, many of whom were new contacts, than ever before.

It wasn't just my neighborhood

The increase in gardening that I observed, certainly was not just limited to my neighborhood. What about in other areas? Is there really an overall increase in gardening activity?

Compliance with the stay-at-home restrictions limited my visits to garden centers, but when I did visit one, it appeared to be quite busy. The garden centers were not only busy with actual customers, but there was often a line of cars waiting to pick up orders that had been called in or emailed



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ahead of time. This procedure of ordering online or by phone is a new way of buying for many garden center customers.

The questions that arise are what restrictions for the COVID-19 are in place and are the overall sales sufficient to keep a garden center afloat. Compared to other business establishments, garden centers seem to have more leeway regarding the restrictions. This freedom allows the garden centers to remain open and maintain a cash flow.

However, the bigger question is: Can this cash flow sustain them?

To obtain answers to these questions, I consulted with Mark Bigej, co-owner and COO of **Al's Garden & Home**, with four locations in the Portland metro area.

As a result of the relatively mild winter, Mark said that the season started strong in January, February and March before COVID appeared on the scene. With the stay-at-home directives and social distancing requirements, it was very cumbersome because their stores were not designed for this type of business.

Knowing that they needed to get procedures in place, Al's Garden & Home closed all of their stores for in-store shopping for a brief period of time. Once they re-opened, it was obvious that gardeners were ready. While the shopping experience changed, sales did not suffer.

I asked Mark what changes had been the most difficult to implement, and he said that social distancing and disinfecting things on a regular basis were challenging. Gardening has always been weather

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WHAT I'M HEARING

dependent. On nice spring days, controlling traffic was difficult.

Mark said that many things had to change with both the store layouts and processes. Most customers were patient and understanding, but there were a few who were less compliant and that was difficult for employees.

Another challenge resulted from not being able to hold in-store events.

Al's Garden & Home is well-known for the many events that they host throughout the year. They did not want to eliminate events, but learning how to deal with them as an online experience was unique to them.

One of their more popular events is Al's Kids' Club, which would have been eliminated in the store due to the COVID regulations. However, Al's adapted by offering the Al's Kids' Club on Facebook,

YouTube and IGTV.

Getting the staff on board was challenging in the beginning because there were so many uncertainties. Rules and regulations were not firmly entrenched and were subject to change. It was difficult to know how to be safe and smart about serving customers because in this pandemic, there is no "how-to" book to read and there is little history on which to rely.

This is where having a team that works together and is open to new ideas is critical.

No sign of diminishing

It is heartening to know that even with all the challenges, garden centers are more than holding their own. I had one manager tell me that this year sales have been the best ever.

Judging in my neighborhood, I do not

see any signs that the gardening fervor is diminishing. If anything, I think it is intensifying because as gardeners see what other gardeners are doing, the creativity spreads.

Also, being outdoors has many advantages. Getting exercise outside in the fresh air can be mentally and physically refreshing.

With so many troubling things going on in our world, it is refreshing to see the optimism that gardeners have. Mark said it well: "Believe it or not, we are already looking at our floor plan for Christmas. There are some fun ideas floating around — we'll have to see where we land."

I think that optimism is a key factor in the garden industry. What could be more optimistic than selecting plants at a garden center, putting them in the ground or a container and enthusiastically waiting for them to bloom or produce? It is just one more sign that hope springs eternal! ☺

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