



A demand 'renaissance' for nurseries

Growers advise flexibility as they anticipate shortages, substitutions and sustained demand for 2021

BY CURT KIPP

IN 2020, NORTH AMERICAN nurseries experienced a roller-coaster ride of escalating dread, stomach-churning twists and unexpected thrills.

There was uncertainty in the early spring due to COVID-related shutdowns in the U.S. and Canada, but nurseries were allowed to stay open, resulting in robust orders and shipments from spring into summer. With travel canceled and many white-collar employees working from home, more folks than usual found refuge in their backyard gardens, driving sustained demand for plants.

The spring may have started off wobbly, but the summer had serious legs lasting into the fall. Many growers had to hustle to keep up.

"Everyone wanted everything at the same time," said Debbie Lonnee, product development manager for **Bailey Nurseries**, during a recent panel discussion. Bailey is a large and highly diversified grower of shrubs, trees, liners, seedlings and rootstocks based in St. Paul, Minnesota, with additional growing locations in Illinois, Washington state, and Oregon.

That leaves green industry businesses to ask — what's coming in 2021?

Shortages, substitutions and sustained demand

Lonnee and others took part in a recent online panel convened by the Nursery and Landscape Association Executives of North America (NLAE). Participants were bullish, saying they expect plant shortages, substitutions, higher prices and sustained demand for

plants this coming spring, as consumers continue their newfound love affair with gardening.

Jeff Olsen serves as president and CEO of Brookdale Treeland Nurseries Limited, a major Canadian grower headquartered in Schomberg, Ontario, with growing locations from the Maritimes to British Columbia. He said the strong demand his nursery experienced in late spring and summer of 2020 has continued into Christmas tree season, where the company also has a strong market presence.

Holiday orders are up 10–15% from a year ago. Olsen takes that as a positive sign for his nursery lines in the spring of 2021 and beyond.

"I'm so excited," Olsen said. "I mean, I feel we're in a real renaissance here. People are rediscovering their gardens. It's such a wonderful thing for our business. So sad for so many businesses that are affected negatively in this pandemic, but certainly for gardening and home improvement, I see it continuing at least the next 2–3 years, at least into 2021."

Chris Scott serves as director of sales for Altman Specialty Plants, one of the nation's largest growers with locations in California, Texas, Florida and Colorado. As others did, he saw an increase in business as the spring of 2021 went on.

"We saw a lot of gardeners come into the fold as a customer base," he said.

Scott said it remains to be seen whether staycations, and working from home, will continue as trends in 2021, but he expects to increase production and sales overall. His company is just tak- ➤

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ing a more conservative approach.

"I think there's still some uncertainty out in the marketplace next spring this year for us," he said.

Making production adjustments

In an ideal world, wholesalers would be able to grow everything customers need in the size and format they want, ship everything to where it's needed, and sell through the entire crop.

Of course, that doesn't happen. One can't know the market that far ahead. Growers must look at sales trends and make ongoing adjustments to production quantities. The longer the cycle of the crop, the more difficult this proves to be.

"When you're a grower of woody material, the difficult part is to make drastic production increases that can take 2–3 years," said Martin Hackney, a sales representative

with Hackney Nursery Company, a large grower of woody plants and perennials based in Greensboro, Florida. "Really, the only the reaction we can do at this point is to try and find the largest liners we can and plant those when and where they're available, just to fill the gaps of what's being created now."

According to Lonnee, Bailey at this point in time can't significantly adjust its quantity of plants coming out for shipment in 2021. "All those plants are ready," she said. "They're going to be overwintered, and will be shipped in the spring of '21 or throughout the summer. We're actually planning for beyond that."

It's similar for **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas Inc.**, based in Woodburn, Oregon, which is one of the largest growers of woody material in the state. According to Kyle Fessler, a grower with the company, most plant offerings are "years in the making."

"I would say that next year's going to be very similar to this year," he said. "We're going to have a lot of sell through, and if we do run out of items, we'll be able to ship and sub with others."

The company has been in a growth mode for the past two years, which has positioned it well to handle demand.

"We've been bringing on new product lines, and we're really focusing on ramping up those product lines, if not for '21 but for the next three years," Fessler said. "We have seen more requests from unexpected customers for material, so I think it could be a really positive '21."

The true meaning of shortages

With the knowledge that woody material takes years to bring to market, nursery buyers are already aware they may encounter shortages in 2021 — but what that means has to be carefully defined. It doesn't necessarily mean you can't get plants.

"I think often times people use the term 'plant shortage' and it's associated with the term, 'outage,'" Hackney said. "So when it's said something is short on the market, it may just be short within the person's perceived parameters of how they should buy it, what price it should be, the

size it should be, based on what they've been able to purchase in the past.

"I think that there have been and will continue to be varietal shortages and size shortages ... but I do think there will be plants that are close substitutions to what they are looking for, with a different or similar plant with similar growth habit. Just as an example, a customer bade me looking for a 6-foot, 15-gallon Green Giant (arborvitae), and the only thing that's on the market is a 5½-foot plant. That's just one of the things that the nursery industry's going to have to deal with."

According to Lonnee, 2021 bookings for Bailey are strong, and the company is doing its best to meet customer needs. She expects the market will be particularly tight for bare root trees, container crops, branded items, flowering shrubs and hedging.

"I guess all of you who are staying at home want to hedge off the neighbors so that you don't see them anymore while you're out in your backyard, enjoying your new gardens," she said. "We think that people are going to need to be flexible, maybe not only on varieties but sizes, and be open to what we call black pot varieties and non-branded varieties, over branded varieties."

Olsen said it's often necessary to move customers "down the cycle" to a smaller and younger plant. "If you don't have a 5-gallon arb, you move them to a 3-gallon arb," he said.

According to Lonnee, the strong market may create some new opportunities for retailers or smaller growers.

"Geographically there are some areas of this country that can make up some plants a little quicker than some of us that live in the cold North can," she said. "And so whether it's a bare root plant or a large hort liner or something like that, I think there are opportunities for that. I know a lot of retailers have become used to just-in-time shipping, turning their benches often and quickly, and bringing in more shipments, but maybe some of the mindset might have to change on that, whether it is potting up some of your own or just having some flexibility within different sizes or varieties. I think there are some opportunities out there to hopefully



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cover the demand that's out there and that everybody can be successful this spring with getting the plants that they need."

While the time of COVID-19 has increased demand for plants, it has also increased production and shipping costs. Freight is more expensive, and growers have had to implement protocols to keep their workers safe and their production humming along. That, of course, costs money.

"We need to recapture that in our selling prices, so we're pushing price increases as well," Olsen said.

Loyalty matters

It's a time when existing relationships with growers is going to be particularly important for plant buyers, whether they are retailers, landscapers or other.

It's the first time I think in our history that we haven't gone looking for new customers in a large way, where we've looked to take on a new chain or something like that," Olsen said. "It's just we don't have the inventory to do it. We're just taking care of our current group of clients I think loyalty is so important in this industry."

Fessler said the same.

"We always have an early order deadline, and then we do our allocations in the fall for the spring," he said. "And the first thing we try to do is take care of our loyal customers. If you received so much of this variety last year, then we try to at least match that if possible, and so we take care of our loyal customers, and then see what's available for new inquiries."

The bottom line? Lonnee advised anyone buying plants for spring of 2021 to get on the phone, if they haven't already.

"It wouldn't have been smart to wait for spring of '21 to place an order for spring of '21," Lonnee said. "If you haven't done it, I encourage you to make a phone call to your sales rep whether it's our company or any of the other folks on the panel today." ☺

Curt Kipp is the director of publications and communications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and the editor of Digger magazine.



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