

COVID-19 year two

THE YEAR 2020 probably instigated more changes in the physical way in which a garden center operates than any other year in history. Not only were there devastating forest fires resulting in hazardous air quality conditions and causing some garden centers to close, but COVID-19 also arrived. I cannot ever recall anything disrupting the workplace in so many aspects.

Garden centers were not immune to the disruption and in many circumstances, it was a matter of trial and error until some semblance of order was established. Due to many different factors — including the wearing of masks, ordering on-line and the requirement of social distancing — garden centers had to adapt their mode of business in ways that their physical layout had not been designed to accommodate.

Here we are in a new year and COVID-19 is still with us, as well as many of the mandated restrictions. Based on last year and some of the problems that arose, the primary question is what has been learned to assist us as we move forward in 2021?

A change in patterns

In 2020, many garden centers closed for a matter of days or weeks until they could adhere to state mandated regulations. The most difficult of the regulations involved the physical spacing of customers, and occupancy limits in a store at any one time.

With many customers working from home, buying patterns changed. Many garden centers with no — or limited — online presence, suddenly found themselves thrust into online business. Whether they welcomed it or not, it became a new way of doing business for them and there were many logistics to navigate.

In 2020, vegetable gardening became very popular, and both vegetable seeds and vegetable plants were difficult for many garden centers to keep in stock. Vegetable seed racks were almost empty before the spring season began. In many instances, re-ordering was to no avail because the supplier had sold out.

Mike Dunton of Victory Seed Co., in Molalla (www.VictorySeeds.com), told me that last year they had to stop accepting

orders for six weeks to catch up with the backlog, and that many other seed companies had the same problem. For 2021, Mike says “I think that it is going to be another busy year because people are still pretty much stuck at home, still nervous about the integrity of the food chain and gardening is a great way to occupy their newly found spare time.”

Mike believes that the orders they have received are larger than past years because people want to avoid potential seed company closures or out-of-stock situations. He has invested in equipment to automate the ordering process and eliminate some of the bottlenecks. “We are definitely more prepared than we were last year,” he said.

Nicole Forbes, education director for **Dennis' 7 Dees Garden Centers & Landscaping**, said they are definitely better prepared than last year. In the past, they did not have an online store presence and that



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quickly changed. Customers can order online and then select the store where they want to pick up their order. The online order item selections are automatically removed from the inventory, thus creating an immediately updated inventory.

For walk-in customers, protocols for masks and social distancing have been established. Transactions are contact-free, credit/debit payment only, and no cash sales. Retail locations offer an hour, 9–10 a.m., for senior citizens and high-risk individuals.

A trend that Nicole has noticed is that more customers are bringing children along with them. With virtual school and flexible hours, children have more time at home with adults and there has been an increased interest in getting children involved — especially in vegetable gardening. Nicole has also continued with her very popular weekly virtual class schedule. These classes last for 45 minutes to an hour and usually draw 1,000 viewers each week.

Better prepared in 2021

With two locations in Portland, **Portland Nursery** closed for slightly over two weeks in the spring of 2020 to change the layout of their stores to meet the COVID-19 regulations. Like many other garden centers, their stores were never designed for social distancing.

Ken Whitten, location manager for the Stark Street store, said that they are definitely better prepared this year and things will run much more smoothly. An example is the display of vegetable starts. In the past, vegetable starts were all in one





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area and this year the organic vegetable starts will be in a separate area to help alleviate customer crowding.

Additional cash register locations have also been installed. Last year the physical store was closed for several months and all sales were conducted outside. A table was set up with accessories and seed racks behind it. Employees would hand pick the customer selections. This year, the physical store will be open with the number of customers monitored and social distancing in place.

Like many other garden centers, Portland Nursery offers curbside pickup. Customers can order on-line from their website and pick up later. With a strong customer base of retirees, many of these people like to talk to a real person. That is an option and customers can call and talk to someone and place an order.

Ken said that there has been a big increase in garden accessories and gifts, with jigsaw puzzles being very popular. Ken has also noted that weekdays have been much busier than in the past. With people working from home, the weekdays have the same shopping appeal that weekends once did.

Adapting to needs

Garden centers are adapting to the needs of the customer in these changing and challenging times. Just think of the current trend for plants that attract butterflies and other pollinator insects and how we now see sections with signage to attract customers to this area. Hummingbirds are another example. It is not unusual to see plant signage to indicate a hummingbird attractant plant.

Another more recent example is the number of selections of *Asclepias* (milkweed), that are available as a food source for Monarch butterflies, when a few years ago there would have been only a few.

Certainly, adaptations and changes are not new to garden centers. Working and sharing together only serves to stimulate new ideas. That creativity that is so valued in garden center personnel will assist in exciting and propelling gardeners forward as we continue to combat COVID-19. ☺

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