



Cultivating the curious

How retailers can engage with a flourishing generation of new gardeners

BY KYM POKORNY

AS THE PANDEMIC GRIPPED the world in early spring 2020, toilet paper, yeast and canning supplies weren't the only products disappearing off shelves. Plants flew out of many garden centers at an unprecedented, or at least unexpected, pace.

All of a sudden, everyone in the country wanted to garden — and many in the nursery industry were caught by surprise.

Growers struggled to get plants to garden centers as the pandemic drug on and retailers scrambled to get them to the consumer. The garden centers that were allowed to stay open saw sales jump 25% to 30% in March and April. Sales for online companies went up a staggering 300% to 400%, according to Diane Blazek, executive director of the National Garden Bureau.

Edibles drove a lot of those sales. Not only do people want to pick high-quality fresh produce feet from their kitchen, they want to be sure they don't run out.

"Developing a green thumb is a way to pass the time for some people, but for others they are using it as a way to attempt to make sure they have access to fresh food after the panic buying that led to shortages in grocery stores," said Suzy Hancock, general manager of **Portland Nursery** in Portland, Oregon.

The spike in edible gar-

dening reminds some people of the 'victory gardens' of World War I and II, a hugely successful campaign to get Americans to grow and donate fresh food that was scarce at the time.

James H. Burdett, founder of the National Garden Bureau, which is celebrating its centennial this year, wrote the Victory Garden Manual in 1943. As Blazek was sitting at her desk last March, she spied the book on a shelf and decided to bring it back to life.

Excerpts and tips from the manual now live on the National Garden Bureau website and give people an easy entrée into gardening. New gardeners love it and the organization's social media accounts have blossomed. That success could be mirrored by others in the industry.

Hordes of young gardeners

About 20 million new gardeners joined the fold last year, adding to the 50 million people already engaged in the pursuit, according to Katie Dubow. She is the president of Garden Media Group, a nationwide marketing agency that conducts annual surveys for the green industry.

A majority of these new horticulture adherents are under 35 and find themselves with time on their hands, particularly on the weekends that were usually filled with kid events or social obligations.

"The biggest competition in the industry is outside activities," Dubow said. "People are busy with weekend activities and all of a sudden they stopped. Now they have time to garden or to" ➡



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learn to garden, and bring their kids into gardening, too.”

In her research, Bridget Behe, professor of horticultural marketing at Michigan State University, found that bored millennials turn online to find out more about gardening. Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram inspire them and blogs and other reliable sites show them how to turn that inspiration into reality.

Behe underscores the importance of driving customers to informative sites. If your website is one of those — and it should be — then it makes sense to have a business card to hand out to customers.

“Millennials are very social and they can’t be social while we’re in this pandemic,” Behe said. “But they can be social online and explore information. I know people on Instagram that have millions of followers.”

If you think you can go without social media, spend some time with Dubow. It can make the difference between a ho-hum business and a thriving one and will be an important factor in holding on to last year’s growth.

She used the example of influencer Timothy Hammond, the Big City Gardener, who uses social media and the internet to share gardening tips, teach growing techniques and chronicle his garden. His Instagram followers sat at about 2,000 for a year. Then, almost overnight, his followers rose to almost 70,000.

That’s just one example, she pointed out. There is a whole slew of potential Martha Stewarts out there. Hitch your star to one of them, and it could shine

pretty bright.

Social media influencers make a job out of spreading their — or many company’s — message through their many platforms. They often have blogs and make money or accept products in exchange for touting your business. Think of them as brand ambassadors.

Dubow encourages nurseries to work with these social media influencers.. They can be found by checking hashtags — #gardening, #pollinators, etc. — and taking note of who has the most followers. One can then message them directly to see if they’re interested in a working relationship.

“There are so many examples,” Dubow said. “People are on the internet and looking for education and inspiration. Companies are behind the scenes helping influencers grow, and vice versa. You can do that, too.”

Being ready for customers online

Facebook, which is where the customers are, should be part of your business plan. Yes, it takes time, but according to Dubow, it’s effective.

When using Facebook, she strongly suggests boosting posts, a practice that costs about \$25 or less a post. See which posts do the best and use that information to inform future decisions, not only about what to post, but also possibly about what to grow.

“Facebook is like a vacuum,” she said. “Boosting posts reaches much more people. Boost one post a week. Post, see what does best and boost that one.”

Brian Bauman, owner of **Bauman’s Farm & Garden** in Gervais, Oregon, was an early adherent to Facebook and finds the payback worth the effort.

“We stress to customers to go to our

Facebook page,” he said. “All of a sudden, you’re there and see beautiful photos and you can get your questions answered. The engagement is phenomenal.”

Even if you don’t want to go that route, you can up your online presence by producing a clean, attractive, easy-to-navigate website. It can be basic, but Dubow believes it’s necessary. Adding a blog or sections of tips, plant lists or garden calendars can be good driver for customers to come back to your website. Good photos are a must. People want to see what you have to offer, especially mail-order customers.

If education is key, Dubow recommends that the number one component going forward and the best way to offer education is through a newsletter. Start to capture emails at point of sale or have a sign-up on your website. Decorate your newsletter with beautiful photos and have customers share theirs. Reader-generated content gets a lot of eyes.

Capitalizing on ‘The Great Reset’

Dubow’s agency called this year’s survey *The Great Reset*, and it indicates big change in the industry.

“We were all tracking the rat race, going through the motions of life,” Dubow said. “I think COVID made us stop. We had to. It gave everyone the chance to reset. One big lesson the industry is learning is that change is a good thing. People are still hesitant about having a website or being on Facebook, but this has forced us to pivot and enter the new world. We should have done it a decade ago.”

More than 80% of those surveyed by Garden Media Group who had picked up gardening during the pandemic said they



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would continue to garden. That's a huge business opportunity.

"I really believe 2020 can be looked at as a foundation year," said Bauman, "The pandemic got people into gardening. We have a lot of opportunity for that growth to continue. Customers are given the opportunity to be successful because they have the time. We are trying any way and every way we can to feel better. Once you garden and feel better, it's been a success. They get their toe in and will keep doing it."

Catering to changing habits

The pandemic has also shifted people's shopping habits with an explosion of mail-order online plant shopping and curbside pickup. Bauman thinks those trends will continue. Blazek agrees.

"Garden centers were forced to recognize that they need a good online ordering system," she said. "More garden centers should also offer preordering to customers. I needed red and white flowers for my daughter's wedding and I couldn't go to the garden center and get them. Preordering took the chance out of it, and I got what I wanted. These are changes that are needed."

At Portland Nursery, sales were high even though doors had to close for two beautifully sunny weeks in March to prepare for proper distancing and other safety protocols and again during Oregon's summer wildfires. Parking spaces



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were lost when the lot was rearranged for curbside pickup. Still, profits equaled last year's bottom line, according to Hancock.

"For all that time being closed, we're ending up the same last year, which is absolutely phenomenal in my mind," she said. "We had a stupendous year."

So did Bauman's, where they modified the shop for personal distancing so that customers had to walk by every item. The idea was wildly successful, resulting in higher-than-average individual tickets sales, which offset fewer in-store shoppers because of COVID. Bauman saw vegetable plant and seed sales take off, as well as houseplants and containers.

"People who would have been saving up money for a trip are spending it on plants," Bauman said. "They're working from home, on Zoom calls and looking out the window and see a plant they need to water. It's possible for them to do that. Our customers are more successful gardeners because they have more time than in the past."

Sustaining the boom

Hancock and others worry about the supply chain for spring, but are planning ahead so that shortages don't occur. If there's ever a year to do careful buying, this is it, she said.

"We don't want shortages this spring," Hancock said. "We are going to buy in a way that we can back out and slow down if we need to."

Chances are she won't need to, though.

"If I had a crystal ball — although everyone's a little cracked right now — I'd say we definitely had a shift," professor Behe said. "Going into spring, people are still restricted. The stimulus was passed. Unless they're unemployed, people are going to keep gardening. Odds are in our favor that we could sustain this." ☺

Kym Pokorny is a garden writer with more than 20 years' experience writing for The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon) and other publications. She is currently a communications specialist with Oregon State University Extension Service.