



A hearty appetite for edibles

Growers find they can't grow enough edible plants, and retailers can't keep them in stock

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

IN MARCH 2020, U.S. governors began rolling out stay-at-home orders, including in Oregon, because of the coronavirus known as COVID-19. Not long after, Americans in lockdown turned their attention to edible gardening any way they could — in containers, in the backyard, online.

When the **Oregon State University Extension Service** at the time waived its \$45 fee for its online vegetable gardening course, approximately 1,000 people per day began signing up. By April 1, 2020, more than 17,500 people had registered for the introductory course.

Meanwhile, seed suppliers across the country were forced to meter their sales. Some sold out. So did vegetable and herb starts growers. Retail garden centers scrambled, scouring sources for starts to restock the shelves.

Although the pandemic elevated edible gardening, where Americans of all ages latched onto food-producing gardening during lockdown, indicators existed before that there would be an increased interest in the activity. The 2016 National Gardening Survey, conducted by Harris Poll, estimated 6 million new gardeners in 2015 — 5 million of which were millennials. Two years later, lawn and garden participation and spending for U.S. households was at an all-time high.

By the 2020 survey (reporting on 2019), activity had dipped.

That drop-off might have continued were it not for the pandemic. But it hasn't. The pandemic created another swell in the wave of garden seekers that some say will last longer.

Yet, even with those impressive sales, edible gardening trends are the same as they were before, according to retailers and growers in Oregon.

This article explores what consumers want in their edible gardens, and the evident shifts of the past 5–10 years.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes and peppers maintain their dominance of the edible garden market. Customers are still keen on old-fashioned heirloom tomato varieties, such as Cherokee purple, Pineapple, and Green Zebra. But, demand has tapered since the explosive interest began a decade ago, with a shift to offering a greater number of tomato varieties overall.

“We have always carried over 200 varieties of tomatoes, and having those unusual varieties is important,” said Laura Altwater, color buyer and manager at Portland Nursery.

There's a balance in thinking through the type of tomatoes to offer for gardeners, as growing regions can vary vastly even in one state. Coastal areas tend to buy more short-day varieties, for instance.

Becky Peterson, sales manager at wholesale grower **Spring Creek Gardens** (Junction City, Oregon), believes that heirlooms, including several beefsteak varieties, are still strong sellers, as are varieties bearing the state name (e.g., Oregon Spring) or an in-state location (Siletz, Santiam, Willamette).

Colors (yellow, purple, chocolate, orange, streaked) are popular. Furthermore, the evergreen best-sellers include the high-yielding Sungold cherry (orange) and Super Sweet 100 cherry (red), the hybrid indeterminate Early Girl, San Marzano plum, and large beefsteak tomatoes.

Gardeners are far more adventurous in the varieties they will buy compared with 10 years ago, which has led to nurser- ➤

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Previous page: Bush beans are a popular choice for new gardeners.

Containers in 4-inch containers are sold to help gardeners feel successful.

PHOTOS BY BECKY PETERSON

ies expanding their offerings, according to Bernie Johnson of **Mountain Valley Gardens** (Klamath Falls, Oregon), “What I have noticed is a decrease in the popularity of grafted vegetables, but the people who like them are attached to them,” Altvater said. “They’ve got more disease resistance and, in some instances, earlier production or more reliable production; they can handle temperature fluctuations better, and you can get more out of a small space from one plant. But grafted vegetables are very much a niche market.” In smaller gardens, especially in urban areas, consumers are opting for a “one of each” approach with tomatoes, which favors the 4-inch pot. Increasingly, six-packs of tomatoes have declined in favor of 4-inch starts (sold the most), gallon sizes, and even two-gallon sizes. Peterson claims they appeal to new gardeners and retirees alike. Stores that serve customers with large gardens and in more suburban and rural areas still supply a limited number of six-packs, usually with staples such as cherry and beefsteak varieties, and with variety packs of mixed-colored peppers.

Peppers

Peppers are hot. Literally and figuratively.

“It used to be when we planned a crop, more than 60% was sweet and bell peppers,” Peterson said. “Now we slant to hot peppers. We’re growing them bigger, putting them in our larger containers, and making a bit more profit on those.”

Cultural influences may partially be at play here, indicated by the popularity of Hot Ones, a breakout YouTube series. It has a simple premise and a big focus on hot sauces and peppers. Celebrities are challenged during their guest appearances to eat progressively spicier, hot-sauce seasoned chicken wings. With 14 seasons, the show has racked up 279 video episodes ranging from 2.6 million to 84 million views each.

“Trinidad, Ghost, Scorpion, Jimmy Nardello’s — we never have enough of these hot varieties,” Altvater said.

“Hot Padrón and Eastern Asian



shishito are the darlings right now,” said Leigh Geschwill, co-owner at wholesale grower **F&B Farms and Nursery** (Woodburn, Oregon).

“The hot peppers have more connoisseurs than the sweet,” Altvater said.

They seem to be skewing toward male buyers. “Even here in our office, it’s become a hobby for [male employees] to see what kind of peppers they can get their hands on,” Peterson said.

Herbs

“We sell as much Italian basil as we can get our hands on,” Geschwill said.

The trend in herb starts is mirrored by that of sales for fresh herbs. Italian basil, cilantro and mint continue on top. Other high-demand herb starts are Italian parsley, dill, English lavender ‘Hidcote’ (*Lavandula angustifolia* ‘Hidcote’), rosemary and thyme. Customers frequently request rosemary and ‘Hidcote’ in larger sizes.

Basil is the number one seller. However, in keeping with the trend for

assortment and variation, consumers are looking beyond the traditional sweet Italian varieties and the classic large-leaf Genovese basil. They seek alternatives such as Thai sweet basil, purple, cinnamon and smaller varieties such as spicy globe.

“We do see a trend to having more specialty products that are ethnic-based,” Geschwill said, including a focus on Asian and Hispanic cooking. “Thai- and Asian-style basil is still second to Italian, but they are gaining in popularity.”

Where six-packs reign

Six-packs of tomatoes and peppers may be waning, but for the many other vegetables planted in multiples, they are thriving, especially with best-selling cool-season vegetables like kale, lettuce, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and sugar snap and sugar pod peas.

“We can’t grow enough sugar pods,” Peterson said.

Home gardeners planting their own green salads buy the six-packs of lettuce, in single varieties and in blends, to keep their



gardens, and bowls, full all season long.

While an *Atlantic* magazine writer called the end to the kale craze in 2019, growers and retail garden center buyers are saying otherwise. Kale — especially the smooth-leaved lacinato or Toscana varieties — continues its status as a health-conscious darling of cooking shows and gardeners. The same cultural influence is seen with the

increasingly prized brassicas, broccolini and Romanesco broccoflower.

“A surprise hit last year was lemon cucumbers,” Peterson said, noting that they sold out. “People became obsessed.”

Altwater has seen that the varieties of cucumbers — a consistent top-seller — has increased and consumers are buying them out. The thin-skinned, small-fruited

Persian-type cucumbers, such as the varieties Mideast Prolific and Adam, are particularly popular because of their presence in grocery stores. While customers walk in asking for Persian, that term doesn’t always make it to the plant tag, according to Altwater. It might be mentioned in the fine print of the description. Staff training helps to match the plant to a buyer’s >>

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Sweet banana peppers (top) and sweet corn options (below) are available in 4-inch starters.

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request after a trip to the supermarket.

Similarly, although both winter and summer squash never go out of style. The proliferation of sizes and shapes from seed companies and in the supermarket — for both eating and decoration — is prompting gardeners to experiment in parallel to their culinary experience. One trend in packaging Altwater noted, has been a preference for the jumbo packs growers are using, instead of regular six-packs.

“The individual cells are much taller and wider than shorter; the plants slightly larger with a better root space,” she said. The plants don’t dry out as quickly, and they have a longer shelf life. On the retail side, the jumbo packs may be a dollar more expensive, but they’re worth it, she said. Eliminating the different sizes and codes at the register, having all of the tray packs the same size, makes it easier to explain pricing to the customer because they have fewer sizes to interpret.



Nothing off limits with pots

Today, customers are buying plants as starts that traditionally have only been directly seeded, and some even historically recommended against as a transplant. This includes corn (both ornamental and sweet), carrots and even beets.

“We sell a lot of corn,” said Peterson, “and they will buy a 4-inch beet, almost ready to eat” as a start, Peterson said. Spring Creek also sells lots of white, red and sweet potatoes in gallon containers.

The trend may be the upshot of the fear to fail.

“People think they can’t have luck with seeds,” Altwater said.

The last five to six years saw an influx of younger generation gardeners, and then the pandemic added even more new gardeners. They may be looking for foolproof gardening as well as the



convenience of more mature plants sold in larger gallon sizes.

“For new and inexperienced gardeners, starting off with a gallon gives you a bigger root system, it gives you a head start,” Geschwill said. “It’s easier to grow. I’ve killed lots of 3.5-inch plants, but not as many gallons; they will handle stress better.”

Container growing

Breeders continue to actively pursue the container and patio gardening market with varieties that are more compact but have good yields. “That has really picked up,” Altwater said.

The selection is now vast of well-performing bush cherry tomatoes, mini bell peppers and mini eggplants, compact hot peppers, globe beets, compact bush squash and zucchini, leaf lettuce, chard, and even bush runner beans and carrots!

Early to plant

Another surprise is the delivery of tender starts earlier, especially as sales of home greenhouses soar. (At least one greenhouse manufacturer reported 80% greater sales year over year at the beginning of the pandemic that has leveled now to 50% higher sales than the year before.)

“With tomatoes, and wholesalers providing bigger sizes, we start to get gallon sizes now in early April, where in the past we wouldn’t see them until the end of

Sweet banana peppers (top) and sweet corn options are available in 4-inch starters.

PHOTO BY BECKY PETERSON



April or May,” Altvater said.

The challenge for retail centers is to keep the plants protected during these early deliveries and to be sure their customers are aware of this need for protection, too, before they leave the store. Growers also face a challenge when shipping earlier these tender items, like cucumbers, which may go from a warm greenhouse to a cold truck,

It’s a balance to keep those plants alive and delivered in good shape.

On the opposite end of earlier delivery of plants to consumers is the trend of season-extending, Geschwell said.

“We have seen good sales in fall crops,” she said. Customers are growing in personal greenhouses and in containers, which stay warmer placed up against the house.

The rise of organics

Consumer demand for organic produce continues to grow, with sales finishing 14% higher in the fourth quarter of 2020 over the previous year. That demand has extended beyond supermarket shelves to the plants and seeds consumers buy, which in turn has influenced a rapid increase and a better selection of organic seeds.

“I’ve been seeing that production is increasing and getting more stable for us greenhouse growers,” Geschwill. ➤➤

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Edibles are no exception. You will find a number of edibles on the site. Here are some that you can search for:

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Herbs like silver thyme are fragrant options for home gardeners.

PHOTO BY BECKY PETERSON



In fact, the organic seed market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 12.7% over the next 5 years. North America has the fastest growing market, and vegetable seeds make up nearly half of all organic seeds coming to market, according to research firm Mordor Intelligence.

The impact of the pandemic

It remains to be seen whether the explosive gains in edible gardening endure after COVID-19 recedes. But already this season, growers and retailers are seeing short turnaround times for sales. Crops that might normally have lasted two weeks in inventory are gone in a matter of hours or days.

"Anything that can be grown, people are buying. Last year, we were still selling broccoli in late May, and it used to be if you had broccoli in March you were panicking," Peterson said. "Nobody got their fill of lemon cucumbers and Walla Walla onions, so this year they are buying them in droves. And the strawberries sold out in minutes. I probably haven't even scratched the surface on sales and we're out for the season."

Growers and retailers are stretched their thinking on their production numbers and are trying to plan accordingly, but consumers may still be in a scarcity mindset.

When Geschwill forecasted her output for the year, she doubled the vegetable plant production.

"Based on demand just in March, that was a good call," she said.

On the retail side, Altvater is also increasing her numbers, ordering extra heavy. For instance, one weekend in March, coming into Sunday morning, she had only 10 flats of vegetable, where 



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Colorful basil options are great for cooking.

PHOTO BY BECKY PETERSON



normally she would have 40 to 50.

“That was me underbuying,”
Altwater said.

That experience, and the experience of last year, is pushing her to buy outside of her comfort zone and increase her orders. The next weekend, her Sunday inventory was just fine. Nevertheless, sales already show that the popularity of home-grown veggies is as strong this year as it was last, she said.

One outcome of last year’s shortage is it provided garden stores confidence to sell different varieties. “When they realized that they could put them out and customers would still come,” Peterson said. Customers were flexible and were actually excited to see different varieties they hadn’t tried before.

“This year we brought back Amish paste tomato, reintroduced Aunt Molly’s

ground cherry (*Physalis*), Martini cucumber and Mojita mint,” she said.

The shortages pushed nurseries to experiment as well.

“We were doing vegetable programs on the fly daily,” Peterson said. “We had shortages of seeds, plastics, and it introduced us to different varieties of pole beans and squash, and we found some new things that we liked.”

Geschwell also had *Physalis* to offer and is testing lemon grass and artichokes in gallons.

“I don’t feel it is risky,” she said. There’s no way to know if the choices

made are going to meet market demand, but as gardeners are looking for a wide variety of crops, experimenting at this moment in time is warranted.

“Some people are going to be hooked, they had great success gardening last year, and others had challenges, and they still want to try,” Altwater said. “In general, we will gain a lot of gardeners from the pandemic. We are in a general upward trend.” ☺

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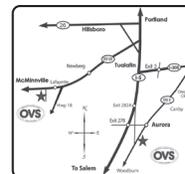
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