

Let's keep them growing

IHAVE WRITTEN SEVERAL columns on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on garden centers and how they have responded to it. These last two years have been like no other in recent history—not just for garden centers, but every citizen.

In many cases, our lives have been adjusted for us and we have had to adapt to many situations that we have no control over.

In general, the garden center business has weathered the last two years quite well—certainly much better than many other businesses. In most situations, they were required to implement restrictions, but they were permitted to remain open.

The sales of some categories of products, such as house plants, have exploded beyond expectations. One garden center manager told me that when he thinks sales of house plants will begin to level out, it just does not happen and each month sales continue to climb. With more people working from home, even if there is not an outside space for a garden, there is always room for a houseplant. Many of

them, I hear, are often given names!

Those fortunate people who have the space for an outdoor garden are gravitating toward a vegetable garden, and the sales of seeds and plant starts continue to show huge increases. Last year caught many garden centers unprepared for the surge in vegetable gardening and all of the related supplies. The order preparation was much better this year, but there was definitely a hesitation regarding future ordering. The major question was whether the surge would continue. It has.

Garden centers, like any other business, are constantly looking for new markets to attract new customers. However, what about businesses that are certainly within the boundaries of the horticulture industry, but are not garden centers? These are businesses that have no indoor plants and do not focus on outdoor plants, either. What is happening with them?

A fertilizer powerhouse

I know of one particular business that resembles an old-fashioned feed and farm



Mike Darcy

Head “plant nerd,” longtime speaker, host of gardening shows on radio and TV, and author of the In the Garden email newsletter. You can reach Mike, or subscribe to his newsletter, at itgmikedarcy@comcast.net.

store, but it really is much more than that. The name of the business is Concentrates, and its name does not begin to describe what it offers.

I first encountered them early in my Oregon gardening years when I was looking for some larger than 5-pound bags of blood meal and bone meal. A gardening friend suggested I take a look at the store.

On my first visit, the physical building seemed like it might collapse at any moment, but the service was friendly, the staff knowledgeable, and they had the product that I wanted.

Concentrates began in 1938 as a buyer's co-op for local farmers, farm supply stores, and feed mills that wanted to take advantage of their combined buying power. Today, Concentrates has grown to become the largest wholesale distributor of organic fertilizers on the West Coast. While their product mix has greatly expanded, the bags of blood meal and bone meal are still available.

In 2011, they moved to their first modern facility and are now operating out of a large industrial warehouse in Milwaukie, Oregon.

General Manager Heather Havens joined Concentrates in 1997 and recently told me that the last two years had been their best sales years in the history of the company. Heather has been active in the organic gardening community and was involved in creating the Oregon State University Organic Master Gardener Program. She also currently sits on the board of the Portland Area CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) Coalition. She



WHAT I'M HEARING

The warehouse setting (right) and interior of sales floor (previous page) of Concentrates is not your usual retail space. PHOTO BY PAT BLANTON



is very involved in the product selection and overall image of Concentrates.

A new generation of gardeners

The pandemic has brought a new generation of gardeners who want to grow their own food. They want to have some control over what they are eating, and that includes what might have been sprayed on it.

They probably do not fully know what the word “organic” means, but it is often thought of as a term used to reference something as being pure or without synthetic chemicals. Many of these new gardeners want to purchase products that encompass this belief.

These new gardeners are also discovering the true joy of being outside, gardening, and working their hands into the soil and watching something grow. Heather said that these new gardeners have many ques-

tions because so much of gardening is new to them. Many of the new gardeners started with vegetables and now are adding ornamentals into their mix.

At the end of the summer, it is not unusual for customers at Concentrates to bring in a tomato or squash to proudly show off something that they have grown.

When I visit garden centers, it is not common to see large bags of organic fertilizer products for sale. I do not mean the niche products, but more of those that are mainstream, such as blood meal, bone meal, cottonseed meal, fish meal, alfalfa meal, etc.

Many gardeners have heard about these products from other gardeners and seek them in sizes larger than 5 pounds. Also, these products are highly unlikely to

be found in large box stores. Adding items of this nature to the inventory would provide another reason to visit a locally owned garden center.

A new niche in gardening products

Concentrates may be just a niche in the world of garden centers and related stores, but it is a niche that will spread. Organic sections in garden centers have continued to expand in recent years, yet offering fertilizer packs in larger sizes is rarely an option. Perhaps a new creative marketing tool would be to bring in a few different organic fertilizer products and test the waters. Your store might just be offering gardeners a new niche. It is certainly a niche-oriented world today. ☺



Irrigation Solutions for the Green Industry

R2000WF Rotator®

S10 Spinner

REQUEST A FREE NURSERY KIT
SPRINKLERS // HAT // LITERATURE
INFO@NELSONIRRIGATION.COM



TWG® Mobile App



Producing high-quality, nursery plants requires consistent uniformity and reliability from your irrigation system. Whether you're growing in a greenhouse, can yard or in the field look to Nelson for a full line of solutions. Choose from Rotator®, Spinner or Spray technology combined with pressure regulators and control valves. Save water, save energy, save labor and do a better job of irrigating. **BUY AMERICAN — CHOOSE NELSON.**

NEXT GENERATION TWiG



Use 1000 Series Valves for zone control and remotely control and monitor your irrigation system from anywhere with our new TWiG® Wireless Controls mobile app and next generation TWiG® components.

Designed & Built in Walla Walla, Washington, U.S.A. — nelsonirrigation.com — Tel: + 1.509.525.7660