

# Selling the fall season

**T**HE 2022 SPRING GARDEN season in the Pacific Northwest is probably not going to go down in the annals of history as a record sales year for local garden centers. After two robust years, the sales did come on the scene, but it was as if the air was let out of the balloon.

Garden centers went into the spring season with high expectations and were prepared for continued success in increasing sales. Such expectations and planning proved to be unrealistic.

Aside from garden centers, few other businesses are as heavily dependent on the weather. This past spring, the weather played a dominant role, and not in a positive way. Customers stayed indoors due to record rainfall, and cool-to-cold weather. The soil was too wet for planting and, in many cases, it was like planting in the mud. Plus, the cool temperatures delayed the planting of many summer vegetables, both from seed and starts.

There have been seasons like this before, and there will be again, but this season definitely proved how extremely difficult it is to deal with the weather. There is no question that the garden center business is weather dependent, and it is something that none of us can control.

## Predicting demand for a living good

There is a saying that if the weather is not conducive to gardening prior to Memorial Day, much of the public will only do minimal garden activities. In fact, many major gardening activities will be put on hold until the next year! Perhaps this does not deprive the avid gardener, but it certainly stalls the weekend gardeners, who are often the customers that spend many dollars getting ready for spring and summer.

Plants are a living and growing commodity. They are not inanimate objects like a bag of fertilizer, a pot, or a garden



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hose that might just need to be dusted as they remain on the shelves. Plants need constant care from their very beginning to the day they are sold, and the care they need to thrive costs both time and money.

It is difficult to plant a crop weeks or months before it will be sold and to predict the demand. To compound the situation, this year had major price increases in most categories due to supply issues. This includes the potting mix, the pots, the fertilizer, the plant starts and the cost of fuel — to say

nothing of the cost of labor, provided you could find laborers in the first place.

There seem to be few businesses of any kind that do not have help wanted signs. Finding employees is one thing, and keeping them is another. One manager compared staffing issues to a revolving door.

The higher cost of fuel has had an impact on garden centers and not just on the direct cost for their own uses. The container loads of pottery shipments from Vietnam and Thailand have not only had price increases on the actual pottery, but the surcharges can add several thousand dollars in fees to each shipment.

The fuel charges do not end there, because once a container has landed in >>



## What I'm Hearing

a U.S. port, there can be surcharges getting it delivered, and then finding a truck and driver can be difficult. Even shipments on goods grown and shipped in the U.S. are affected. Today, having houseplants shipped from Florida can result in a freight surcharge.

Then, there is still the COVID-19 issue and all of its many variants. One garden center manager said that they have more people out with COVID now in early July than they did a year ago.

### Keeping a positive outlook

Considering all of these issues, garden center personnel need to maintain a positive outlook for the future. They have a passion for plants and gardening and are certain to create innovative mechanisms for attracting customers this fall.

Even with all of the negatives that

have occurred this year, there is much to be positive about. The opportunity is there to make the fall season the best ever and give customers a reason to shop and to come back again in the spring.

Since fall is the big season for bulbs, garden centers should have displays that are exciting, colorful, and enticing. The displays will not be just racks of bulbs, but instead there will be creative uses for bulbs that will encourage customers. It can be surprising the extent of the talent that garden people have. Gardening is considered a form of art and many of the employees probably have some hidden display talent.

Late summer and early fall are the time to plant a fall garden. This is not a concept that most beginning gardeners consider. Customers need to know that if they did not get a spring vegetable garden

planted, they can try a fall one. Perhaps in some ways a fall vegetable garden is easier to manage than a spring one.

Garden displays should highlight the wide selection of vegetables that can be planted in the fall. Many garden centers carry plant starts of some of the core crops like cauliflower, broccoli, and cabbage, and seeds for bush beans, carrots, lettuce, kale, chard and peas.

This spring season was not the best, so garden centers should try to make the fall season the best. It is time to make up for all of the things that did not get planted in the spring, so focus on the plants and things that are special for fall. Fall is a great time of year and the various plants abound in color and diversity.

What better way to highlight this special time of year and increase garden center profits? ☺



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