“What are you hearing, Chris?”

To be honest, what I’m hearing most is that very question. Everywhere I go folks are worried about the coming season, and they want some sort of reassurance that things are going to be okay.

Granted, you’ve got reason to be concerned. As I heard somebody put it recently, “This isn’t our father’s recession.” This one is unprecedented. Never before have so many things gone so sour at the same time. Coupled with the global economy and super-fast worldwide communication, this is nothing like any of the 12 recessions since the Great Depression. (Of course, we should be thankful things are nowhere near as bad as they were in the ’30s, when stocks lost 90% of their value and unemployment hit 25%. It took WWII to lift us out of that mess.)

Anyway, so far this year I’ve heard enough good news to make me feel like the glass is still half full. I’m not saying something won’t come along and slosh a few fluid ounces out of it, but right now the evidence for a good spring is in our favor.

1. Weather has always been No. 1. For the 26 years I’ve been in the business, and I suspect for the other 46 or so that GrowerTalks has been around, weather has been the make-or-break of spring. Good times, bad times, cheap gas, expensive gas, low interest rates, high interest rates … it doesn’t seem to matter. Give a consumer a sunny Saturday and a well-stocked garden center and she’ll buy. And I can’t find a single economic indicator that would prevent this from happening in 2009.

The big question is, how MUCH will she buy? Maybe she’ll buy two baskets instead of four, or one flat instead of two. How much she buys depends on how attractive you make your product. This is the year that your product must be absolutely irresistible. And you’ve got to put it in her hands. Statistics prove that if a woman picks it up, she’s much more likely to take it home.

2. Spring might be early, and nice. I hope we can trust the weather forecasters at The Old Farmer’s Almanac and at www.myskeye.com (the firm that Walmart and others hire to do long-range weather forecasting), because they both say spring should be good in much of the country, with temperatures somewhat above normal and precipitation mostly at or below normal. The Almanac has favorable forecasts for 13 of 16 regions of the country. And Myskeye thinks spring will come early to the southern states. Myskeye
is an expensive subscription service, but the Almanac is free—check out the forecast for your region at www.almanac.com/weather/. Both of these have a long track record of relative accuracy, so I’m hopeful that they’ll hit it right this spring.

3. Consumers say they won’t cut back. So far I only have a small sample to base this on, but it’s still heartening news. This comes from a Consumer Buzz Live focus group I hosted at the ProGreen Expo in Denver in January. All eight panelists, who ranked themselves as average to enthusiastic gardeners, say they’ll spend as much or more this spring on their gardens as they did last year. Not one planned to cut back. They said that if they did have to make personal budget cuts, it would be on eating out or travel, not gardening.

4. We don’t boom during boom times, so why should we stink during bad times? The stock market made some giant gains in the past 10 years, and yet floriculture grew only marginally in that time. So if we don’t boom when the rest of the world booms, why should we bust when they bust? I suspect that, while spring sales may be soft in some markets, we’ll be down a miniscule amount compared to other, more volatile categories (be glad you’re not in the car business). We may not be recession proof, but I firmly believe we’re recession resistant.

Okay, so all that said, you can now accuse me of wearing rose-colored glasses. That’s okay. I believe in this business. I believe humans will always crave flowers and plants. How to make money providing them will continue to be a challenge. But it’s one I know you’re up to.