This bi-monthly column marks the beginning of not just a new year but an entirely new decade—assuming that there really is something materially different when a tenth-year December page is ripped off the calendar. Rather than quibble about days or weeks of change, let’s compare where the industry is today with the turn of the last decade into 2000.

But first, the bigger picture: In the beginning of the 2000s, the country had survived the over-publicized threat of millions of computers malfunctioning because software on them had not made provisions for the change from “19XX” to “20XX.” This issue was the very first of the international calamities we were supposed to experience, but didn’t. In the ten years since then we have been warned of pandemics like SARS and avian flu. A world climate totally unhinged. Oil spills despoiling entire oceans.

In contrast to the Henny-Penny tales, we had some actual calamities early on. Like the one on September 11, 2001. That day was a game changer in many ways. Certainly economically. Definitely politically. Even on the country’s psyche. The Great Recession is another example.

Some things remain similar to the dawn of the last decade. Economic uncertainty due to the collapse of the dot.com bubble has some parallels to today’s circumstances. Back then, the Republican Party was feeling transcendent, much as it does today with the new configuration in Congress. And most importantly, the daily chronicle of the fictional town of Port Charles, New York, continues to unfold on “General Hospital.”

Closer to home, on the industry front, there’s much to note about 2010 compared to 2000.

The Baby Boomers are at or near retirement, and the surge of McMansions to house the fifty-ish in 2000 are in over-supply to house the sixty-ish in 2010. Same for commercial structures, like malls and office parks. Little wonder that customer counts are down in many retail garden centers. Part of the decline is that there are fewer people (Gen-X) in prime buying mode for our products and services. This demographic trough continues for this entire decade, pending the rise of the Gen-Y generation into our prime marketplace in
There are silver linings to this demographic cloud. Those new retirees include folks who owned industry businesses that are no longer in operation. Less supply. Also, current trends indicate that the Baby Boomers are staying put in their houses in larger numbers than their parents. This trend offers opportunities to extend the period of time that Boomers remain prime buyers. The Boomers that remain in their homes may be enticed to renovate their yards—making more outdoor living space and lowering maintenance.

As with 2000, we finished this decade with the industry’s business model 10 years more mature. However, today we’re even further into the business school model of moving from a lower volume/higher margin per unit business structure to a higher volume/lower unit margin structure. Is it time yet for that cycle to reverse?

The last 10 years have also led to significant increases in branding of plant material. How much more room is there in the market place for branding of plants and/or branding of the producers of those plants? A wild card in the answer-hand of branding is whether consumer behavior regarding repeat purchases of annual plants differs from the presumably less frequent purchases of perennials and woodies.

So, here we are. A new decade. The mortal struggle between supply and demand continues, but I predict that that we’re now halfway to a tolerable equilibrium. The mortal struggle between political elephants and donkeys continues. I predict that Washington theatrics will continue, but the nation’s fiscal crisis will force reality. If it doesn’t, there will be a unicorn running for President in 2012. Branding will continue because it meets the needs of customers. I won’t predict brands that will stick!

Of one thing I’m absolutely certain: In 2020, there will still be grief, joy and jealousy in Port Charles. GT