The River Ridge Report

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After the cold, then wet, then hot spring we had in Chicagoland, I was extra curious to find out how my neighbors responded, gardening-wise, in my annual River Ridge Report. The results were surprisingly positive in one way, somewhat discouraging in another, and revealed an ugly trend that I hope turns out to be nothing.

But wait, I’m getting ahead of the audience. You Acres Online readers know all about River Ridge. Let me make sure everyone’s up to speed.

River Ridge is my middle-class subdivision in South Elgin, Illinois, USA, median income: $67,323. It has 14 streets, 356 homes and plenty of minivans, skateboards and strollers. To conduct the River Ridge Survey (now in its eighth year), my wife and I drive each street looking at front yards for evidence of gardening—hanging baskets, pots, window boxes and flower beds, noting our findings on a carefully crafted survey form (a legal pad). Our assumption is that if someone gardens out back, they’ll do something out front, too.

Okay, what did we learn this year?

The good news: Spring 2011 was a better season than I anticipated it would be, at least as far as participation goes. Last year, 223 out of 356 (63%) homes showed some sign of gardening. This year that number grew to 242 (68%). The best years have shown about 70% gardening participation.

The disappointing news: While garden participation remains solid, I’d say consumption is down. I have no
data to back that up, only our gut feeling that the displays were smaller. Yes, we saw pots and baskets, but we didn’t see as many as in previous years. Maybe someone buys two baskets instead of four. They feel they’re still gardening, but as an industry, the customers’ purchases were down 50%. Casual conversations I’ve had with some retailers about average purchases echo my feeling that they’re buying, just not as much.

A disturbing statistic: Of the 114 houses that do NOT garden, 19 of them (17%) had plastic flowers on display out front. This is the first time we ever noticed enough plastic to track that data, and the results are troublesome. I mean, the last thing we need is consumers deciding that plastic is as good as the real thing—no matter how lifelike some “permanent botanicals” (as the snobs in that trade call them) may be. We’ll track that category in future years.

In the end, I’m most heartened by that solid “households that garden” percentage. Getting the public to buy anything garden-related is our biggest challenge. If that number isn’t slipping, it proves the public is still interested in our stuff. Even a plastic flower indicates that they want some color outside their homes, and that means there’s an opportunity to convert that person to live plants (I’m considering a midnight raid, swapping fake for real).

As for my feeling that overall expenditures are down, that could be an economic indicator rather than an interest indicator.

So there you have it: A slice of Middle America and its gardening habits. But does that apply to your marketplace? Why not conduct a “Hillside Glen” or “Applewood Estates” Report of your own?

Most importantly, inject some excitement into your offerings and your displays, so that when your neighbors pop in for their spring buy, they can’t resist spending just a little bit more. GT