

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Keep Calm and Garden On

Chris Beytes



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By the time you read this, the COVID-19 crisis might be improving, or worsening, or completely up in the air. I can tell you that, as I type this in mid-March, the 2020 California Spring Trials are cancelled, as is the Chicago Garden Show, and several other events I planned on attending this spring are iffy at best.

As for the Stock Market? Well, I'm sorry I even brought it up. My philosophy is that your retirement plan is like cooking rice: put the lid on and don't peek until it's done. Also, "when they're crying, I'm buying."

Whatever the outcome of COVID-19, this ordeal will be a lesson in the fragile nature of the marketplace—which, by the way, we've all taken for granted.

How would you like to be a cruise line operator, with your own State Department and CDC warning the public against taking a pleasant vacation on one of your ships? Or an airline to whom whole regions of the earth are being put off-limits? Or a sports team or concert promoter whose stands and stadiums are empty? Truly, it's a reminder that the status quo is not guaranteed.

To me, however, the coronavirus is a reminder of how fortunate we are to work in horticulture. We produce a product—flowers and plants and food—that improves lives like few others can boast. We talk about being recession-proof and I think we've proven to be mostly that. Yes, the landscape industry took a major hit during the housing crisis, but it's easy to understand why that happened. This crisis, as I see it, can't affect us like that. To the contrary: I see three ways that our products are an antidotes to all of the ills it has caused.

First, if folks are compelled to avoid travel and stay home, what better way to pretend they're on vacation than by sprucing up their home, patio and garden with plants? They might paint, too, or buy new furniture or a bigger flat-screen TV, but we should make sure some living, breathing plants are part of the home-improvement scheme.

Second, regardless of whether the NASA space research about plants cleaning the air was right or wrong or flawed (because it was conducted in a vacuum) or whatever, plants are still good for your indoor spaces for myriad reasons, both physical and emotional. I read that consumers spend \$4.3 TRILLION worldwide on wellness—much of it on unproven homeopathic remedies and supplements—in the hopes of improving their health. Won't they spring for a few houseplants if there's a chance they'll improve the air quality of their home? They will if we give them the opportunity and the right information.

Third, our product—especially on a macro scale—offers an escape from the glowing screens, negative news, squawking of the talking heads and partisan vitriol of our so-called friends on social media. A walk in the woods has never sounded so good (in fact, I'm going to take one when I finish this piece). Equally appealing might be a visit to a pretty, peaceful garden center where the air is pure and the fountains are burbling and the flowers serve as a reminder that there are more important things in life. We just have to remind people we're here. It might call for a whole new advertising plan with less emphasis on sale prices and more focus on wellness.

One of my readers, Ara Lynn from New Hampshire, summed it up well, saying of our industry, "... we're used to dealing with wild cards, i.e. weather. This is just a different kind of weather."

This is a storm we can, I am sure, weather more easily than a rained-out Mother's Day weekend. In fact, we might just experience our best spring in a long time, if we put out a positive message amidst all the negative noise.

That part is up to you.

Have a great spring—and provide plenty of hand-sanitizing stations! **GT**