

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

6/1/2020

No Masking Their Enthusiasm

Chris Beytes



Shoppers at Pesche's Garden Center in Des Plaines, Illinois, take advantage of the first warm weekend of May to stock up on herbs and veggies (and every other variety of plant owner Chris Pesche grows). Social distancing and the required wearing of face masks has not deterred shoppers; to the contrary, they've been turning out in droves and spending record amounts—Chris reports his herb and vegetable sales were up 400% as of May 2.

Pesche's is not alone: *GrowerTalks* has heard from growers and retailers across North America that edibles of all types are a booming category, in large part because of pandemic-inspired food security fears. For a nationwide perspective, we spoke with Mike Sutterer, president and CEO of Bonnie Plants, headquartered in Union Springs, Alabama. Bonnie has 80 growing facilities in 41 states and covers more of the market (49 states) with more product than maybe every other vegetable grower combined.



Pictured: Proving they practice what they preach, Bonnie Plants has converted their test gardens in Union Springs, Alabama (pictured), and Marysville, Ohio, into Harvest Gardens, donating all the vegetables to local food pantries in those communities.

Inset: Mike Sutterer, president and CEO of Bonnie Plants. Photos courtesy of Bonnie Farms

Mike told us Bonnie's has been doing consumer research since late March, when the crisis started to amplify. They wanted to understand how the crisis was impacting consumer behavior—what they were buying, what they intended to buy.

"What we've seen through that research is some 16 million brand new vegetable gardeners have entered the category just in the last eight weeks since the crisis started," Mike stated. "A staggering number of people entering the category."

The benefit to Bonnie's is "probably five-plus years' worth of category growth in one year," he added. Additionally, they found that about 35% of existing vegetable customers say they're dedicating more space to plant extra vegetables and are buying more than they typically would. The appeal appears universal, with no part of the country left behind—from the Southwest, where temperatures have already exceeded 100F, to the Northeast, hardest-hit by the pandemic.

"We're going to co-opt the Postal Service motto: Neither rain nor snow nor sleet, etc. will keep people from buying tomato plants this year," Mike jokes.

We asked how Bonnie's is managing to keep up with demand.

"We really got out in front early," Mike answered. "And our model lends itself to being able to react to something like this. I mean, nobody can predict a global pandemic, but our network of some 80 facilities in 41 states around the country allows us to have the right product at the right place at the right time because we're able to shift [production] around the country as needed to keep up with demand."

As for keeping those new and existing veggie gardeners engaged and buying next season, Mike cites Bonnie's partnership with the non-profit AmpleHarvest.org and the Grow More, Feed More campaign, which encourages home gardeners to donate their surplus vegetable harvest to food pantries across the country. In addition, Bonnie's is donating 5% of sales of vegetable plants from bonnieplants.com from May 1 to July 31 to Ample Harvest.

"Our goal is to get 10 million pounds of fresh vegetables donated directly from home gardens to local food pantries across the nation," Mike says.

The big question, of course, is: "Are tomatoes really the next toilet paper? Should we rush out and buy a flat of Big Boys before they're gone?"

Mike laughed. "We've got plenty. But you should absolutely buy a flat of tomatoes, not because there's going to be a shortage, but because they taste delicious and you'll have some surplus harvest that you can donate to your local food pantry." **GT**