

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Be Wise—Stick With the Plan

Amy Morris

Let me start off by saying I realize that last month Abe VanWingerden wrote about this pandemic with a great article: “Plan, Don’t Panic.” However, let me emphasize that the coronavirus has the world in limbo. We don’t understand it fully; we don’t know how to beat this virus or when “normal” life will start again. As Abe also alluded to in his article, what I might be writing today can be totally outdated for a June issue since I’m writing what’s occurring on Mother’s Day Weekend.

For a lot of small businesses, they’ve been hit by fixed costs until the lockdowns end. What happens then? If businesses aren’t given an all-clear to live normally, what effect will this have on our economy? No one can credibly criticize them for being unprepared, as there’s no economical reason why they’re suffering. A shutdown like this is unprecedented. It’s hard to comprehend when you’re doing everything correct and something like this comes along and could jeopardize your livelihood. We hope that Congress will continue its stimulus relief programs by helping companies retain employees and to help our economy so employers can try to rehire as quickly as possible once the economy starts moving again.

Many companies have taken a massive hit from all of the shutdowns and closures. Our company took a big hit the month of April when Governor Pritzker deemed greenhouses as non-essential. We were shocked. We thought, “We grow vegetables and herbs—why would that not be considered essential?” Luckily, as May rolled around, we were considered essential, so we were able to open our retail doors and ship to all of our customers.

It’s been interesting talking with other garden centers, nurseries and greenhouses in the area. Andy McNitt from McNitt Growers told me, “In our area, we have seen record sales, our business is booming and we are sold out for the season.” He also added that he knows five other growers in the area who’ve experienced the same and are also closed because they’re sold out.

In the last eight days, we’ve experienced the same with our retail business. The parking lot was packed with people standing in line. It makes us all elated that we’re selling, but we have to be conscious of not thinking this is going to happen next year. This trend of sustainability that everyone is feeling—will it continue for the future? I don’t believe it will. We hope in the future everyone will be back at work. We won’t have all this time on our hands to work in our yard and garden.

For the last couple of years, I took a survey of my neighborhood that I borrowed from the master himself, Chris Beytes. I walk around our neighborhood and I notice who has flowers and who doesn’t. I’ve done as Chris has done and counted the houses. I live in a neighborhood of 155 houses, and of those houses, 62 had flowers in the front or side of their homes last year.

As I walk this year (which I'm walking far more often than I have in the past), 134 houses have either flowers or a garden. That's more than a 50% increase from last year. This surge is what all of our garden centers and nurseries are seeing. It's mainly the mom-and-pop shops.

As for our greenhouse, we deal with box stores and grocery chains. We've been held back in April because we live in the state of Illinois and were considered non-essential. Thank goodness that was lifted a week ago, and since then, our greenhouse has gone crazy. And we were lucky it happened before Mother's Day.

In March and April, our young plant sales for garden mums and poinsettias have been well below average, but in just the last 10 days, our numbers have doubled of what we had, plus an increase over last year.

Are we fooling ourselves that we're going to have a record-breaking year all the way through Christmas? I don't know—I don't think any of us know—but I think we've got to stay in the lane that has proven to work for our company in the past. Sticking with the plan, you have to produce what you can sell based on past years.

Back in the day, speculation was a big thing; a lot of us benefitted by it and we also got burned by it. As plant producers, we have really cut back speculation due to the poor margins and nowadays no one can afford to dump plants because every penny counts. So plan wisely and don't jump the gun thinking this trend will be the new normal. I do hope it is, but there are too many uncertainties these days. So be wise and stick with the plan. **GT**

Amy Morris is Vice President of N.G. Heimos Greenhouses in Millstadt, Illinois. She can be reached at Amorris@ngheimos.com.