

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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We Are the Escape

Chris Beytes



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Here we are in the glorious month of April and the Spring '22 season is just kicking off for many of you, while those of you down south and out west have been selling strongly for some months now. At least I hope it's been strong. A note to me from Abe VanWingerden of Metrolina Greenhouses in mid-March indicated that, for them, six of the seven weeks since February 1 had been "above expectations." And since Metrolina sells across a wide swath of the east, and they always plan to do more than the previous year, being "above expectations" is a very good thing, which I hope bodes well for spring in general for all of you. Of course, as usual, weather may be our biggest worry.

Well, weather, along with war, inflation, interest rates, China, fuel costs and surcharges, driver shortages, pot and peat shortages, labor, shipping delays ... in other words, even with the pandemic more or less in our rearview mirror, it's still nuts out there.

You know what this world needs? A place to escape all the insanity.

That place is the garden.

Like you, I've always enjoyed nature. My earliest and fondest childhood memory of nature dates back to when I was five years old, lying on the grass under a tree and looking up through the leaves to the sky, watching the sunlight sparkle through the foliage, and enjoying the many shades of green playing against the blue sky and the dark of the tree's bark, the cool breeze, the tickle of the grass on my neck, the feel of a rock in the small of my back and having to adjust my position. It's a moment spent communing with nature that is my favorite even today ... maybe minus the rock. But, hey, that's part of the fun. The ants, too.

Abe said in his note to me that their research told them consumers were going to stick with gardening in 2022 and that's reflected in the sales data. Consumers do seem to be sticking with gardening, not giving it up for restaurants and movies and concerts and cruise ships. All of which I'm sure will make a comeback, but I think this continues to be our time to shine as consumers seek comfort in an uncomfortable world.

To that end, I'm writing this to encourage you to lean hard into promoting the comforting, reassuring aspects of our products and services this year and beyond. The past two successful seasons have been a gift, as Anna Ball puts it, not something we earned or deserved. We were simply in the right place at the right time (and to your credit, we delivered!).

But now I think we need to be more deliberate with our messaging, more vocal and more visible, as other competitors come back online and do their best to attract the consumers' attention. We can't simply take an "if we grow it, they will come" attitude. They might come ... but then again, they might not—at least not in the numbers we're hoping for. There's going to be a lot of competition for discretionary dollars—which could be fewer, thanks to inflation—and we need to be in the mix.

We can't assume folks know how relaxing and calming and healing a house and garden full of plants can be. Our marketing efforts (and we need plenty of marketing efforts, whether small or large) need to reiterate and reinforce what so many consumers have learned about our products over the past two years. Our garden centers should be places of escape, with fountains and soft music and plenty of seating areas for relaxed contemplation. Your displays should be Zen-like and inspirational. Your staff should be calm, smiling and welcoming (no matter how frazzled they actually are).

And fun! Don't forget that plants are fun, gardening is fun and hanging out in the garden at the end of the day with your favorite companions, foods and beverages isn't just fun, it's one of life's great pleasures.

Another way consumers can escape the chaos of the world is through sensorial stimulation. This is no time to be drab or boring with our products and marketing. Grab their attention, make them smile, make them laugh, make them think and you'll give them another form of escape from the troubles of the world.

Yes, we might have a third fantastic year in a row by simply being in the right place at the right time, but the good times can't last forever. And that's why it never hurts to remind folks what they instinctively know: We are the escape. **GT**