

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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A New Era in Holiday Houseplants

Austin Bryant

“The only thing that stays the same is, everything changes.”—From the song “Time Marches On”

By the end of WWII, new technology had swept into the U.S. air and automobile industries, bringing innovations in energy, propulsion and aerodynamics that would change the way we travel for the next hundred years. The same can be said for the commercial industries that took leaps in advancements due to the '60s space race. The satellite technologies that were created from the NASA Mercury Missions all the way through the Space Shuttle missions again reshaped the way we do business through advancements in automation and communication.

The telephone turned from a simple wire-to-wire communication device into a tool so mobile and adaptable it can now replace everything from car keys to monitoring heart pacemakers and communicating health information to your local doctor before symptoms are physically felt. There's an “app” for literally everything.

Here again, we've passed through another era in American history. We're now “post pandemic.” The pandemic has reshaped the way we socialize, communicate and, most importantly for this article, “purchase goods.” This era in advancements may not seem as important as the space race, but to the local garden center or plant shop it's equally as important.

These businesses are all operating in a different environment than they were just three years ago. This includes the customers' perception on timely fulfillment. Personally, I order tons of stuff online just so I don't have to visit the store. The idea of second-day delivery overrides the instant gratification of having it in my hand right now on most items.

Ordering online was a necessity during the pandemic with social distancing, but today even with relaxed social distancing, those habits seem to die hard. I always believed the time would come where people could order and receive larger potted plants via retail common carrier delivery. I just never dreamed we would run so far in such a short amount of time.

The innovations in retail plant shipping have leaped lightyears ahead of where we were pre-pandemic. I've seen all sorts of new shipping innovations. Everything from expandable foam lock, plastic shrink wrap, artificial no-dribble soil, not to mention some engineered locking cardboard inserts that NASA would be envious of. This new technology in individual plant shipping opens the door to holiday gifting opportunities for plant shops. Millennials were increasing their purchase of houseplants in Fall 2019 (pre-COVID-19). The houseplant craze wasn't started because of the pandemic, just overly fueled by it.

A whole new generation of customers has been successfully ordering and re-ordering plants online. Will these

same customers drop-ship houseplants to loved ones for Christmas? Also, will blooming foliage or houseplants now have a better shot of consuming more of the Valentine's and Mother's Day markets? I'm really looking forward to the holiday season to see if online houseplant sales resurge back up to similar levels post 2019.

The idea of what a houseplant is to the Millennial generation is different than previous generations. The term "plant pet" defines this perfectly. Where an older generation buyer is likely looking to fill a decorative need with an interior plant, the younger Millennial is purchasing a plant for personal fulfillment. It's this personal attachment that gives me hope plant sales will rebound from a slow third quarter as a personal, shippable gift item and become an annual holiday item.

There's one pitfall the industry must avoid at all costs: The nurseryman or seller can never cross the line of what's unacceptable in quality for the online purchaser. Unlike buying from a brick-and-mortar store, the customer has no chance to view quality before committing to a purchase. If a plant sold is of low or unacceptable quality, the buyer not only feels let down, but betrayed.

Here's an example: Our family has purchased from Walmart using the pick-up service. I'll never forget looking at some bananas that were brought out to the car for our pickup. They were the exact opposite of what I would have chosen for myself. All I could think was, "How would someone choose this and were they the last bananas available?" From that day forward, I've chosen my own bananas and don't rely on another person to match the quality I want. In this case, the extra service didn't outweigh the power of choice.

This exact scenario could play out this holiday season if old, leftover "B-grade" material from this summer is passed forward to the unknowing online consumer. Don't give the customer the option to slip back into old habits purchasing outside our industry. Houseplant sales have had a tough summer with a slight rebound this fall. The 2022 holiday season can be a real opportunity to pick our market up and move forward, but only if we choose to push the best material and provide yet another cycle of positive plant-buying experiences. We need to solidify our industry as giftable for the next 20 years and beyond. **GT**

Austin Bryant is in Sales for Heart of Florida Greenhouses, Inc. in Zolfo Springs, Florida.