

GROWERTALKS

Paul's Pointers

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Perennially Strong

Paul Pilon



PAUL PILON

As the editor-at-large of Ball Publishing's *Perennial Pulse* newsletter, I think it's only a natural assumption that I have a bias toward perennials. You know that we perennial folks don't recognize or fully appreciate that other category (yes, I'm referring to annuals).

For the record, although my career has gravitated towards perennials, I still recognize the other major category and have been known to even purchase a few of them each year for around the house. Then I get the satisfaction of watching them die in the fall knowing that they won't return, while my perennials, on the other hand, will come back even bigger and stronger than they were this growing season. Geez, after reading that I guess I might have a little bias towards perennials after all. I'll work

on that while I plant a few more perennials this year.

Putting my biases to the side, I can't tell you how rewarding it's been to be on the perennial side of the business for the last 26 years. Before that, I recall being a student at Michigan State University when they were actively trialing perennials to help growers get them in bloom for spring sales. Then I became a perennial grower, author and a consultant, where I've had the privilege of sharing my knowledge and experiences with the industry. Bottom line, I love perennials and I love this industry.

Perennial strength is trending

As I visit with growers across the country, there's one message that seems to be repeating itself over and over again: Perennial sales are strong. For many growers who produce different product lines such as annuals, they commonly share that perennial sales are stronger than annual sales. By stronger I mean the rate of sales growth increases are larger, not necessarily the total number of plants sold. Obviously, the actual results vary from grower to grower, as well as with geography and weather conditions, but my summation is the perennial segment was pretty good overall this year and often the strongest category for many retailers and growers.

This perennially strong sales year doesn't appear to be an anomaly or a one-and-done situation—perennial sales have been solid for a number of years now. Results from the 2024 Census of Horticultural Specialties showed the perennials category increased 47.4% since the 2019 Census—that's a whopping 9.48% per year during that period.

To demonstrate how strong perennial sales have been I compiled data showing the increase in sales of four major categories: Annuals, Bedding/Garden Plants, Perennials and Nursery Stock (see the table). As you can see, each of

these categories experienced an increase in sales between 2019 and 2024, but the percentage increase of the Perennials category was significantly higher than the other categories.

Why are perennial sales strong?

There are several reasons perennial sales are strong and growing at a faster rate than the Annuals and Bedding/Garden Plant categories. In no particular order, here's several of them.

- 1) Longevity.** They come back every year. With increasing costs of virtually everything over the past few years, consumers are seeing the value of perennials and getting years of enjoyment. This leaves more time and money for other important things they want to do or purchase.
- 2) The value proposition.** The cost of perennials and annuals are becoming more in line with one another. For example, a 4.5-in. pot of annuals costs the consumer approximately \$5.00 whereas a 1-qt. container (about the same sized pot) of perennials is around \$6.00 (these are just examples—pricing varies widely for a number of reasons). Consumers who understand this are often willing to spend a little more money for a perennial that comes back year after year.
- 3) Improved genetics.** Breeders have really taken great strides towards improving various attributes of perennials. Many of these improvements include the growing habit, disease resistance, garden performance, heat and humidity tolerance, cold hardiness, flower color, bloom time, and duration of flowering.
- 4) Earlier flowering.** Many perennials on the market are first-year flowering plants, unlike their previous generations that required a cold treatment (vernalization) and/or long daylengths for flowering. Breeders have worked to reduce these requirements or eliminated them altogether. The result: shorter production times, earlier flowering and more flower power on the retail shelves.
- 5) Frost-to-frost sales.** Unlike annuals, which are predominantly sold in the spring and early summer, perennials are commonly produced and sold throughout the entire growing season, from early spring right on through the autumn months.
- 6) Mainstream market.** The breeding efforts mentioned above have resulted in earlier flowering for many perennials and lots of flower appeal. This has shifted perennials from the back of the store as a niche category to colorful displays at the front of garden centers as mainstream retail sales drivers.

2024 Census of Horticultural Specialties % Change from 2019 to 2024

Category	% Increase 2019 - 2024	Change per Year
Annuals	18.8%	3.76%
Bedding/Garden Plants	27.20%	5.44%
Perennials	47.40%	9.48%
Nursery Stock	17.5%	3.50%

I imagine there are more explanations for the strong perennial sales over the past several years, but I believe the reasons above are the foundational components supporting this growth. With continued improvements in plant breeding and the value perennials offer, I suspect there will be more opportunities to support additional

growth for years to come.

Like any trend, the sales of perennials won't always go up each year. With the weight of the economy combined with unpredictable weather patterns, it's hard to expect perennial sales to remain consistently strong in any given period, but I'm anticipating perennial sales will continue to outshine the other categories over time. I expect sales to remain perennially strong. **GT**

Paul Pilon is editor-at-large of the Perennial Pulse e-newsletter and Director of Growing at Opel Growers in Hudsonville, Michigan. He can be reached at paul@opelgrowers.com.