

How Was Last Weekend? Your "COVID Scores"; IGC vs. Big Box

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COMING UP THIS WEEK:

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Breaking records in the South
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Spring is here, or is on its way, in spite of the pandemic, which is why I'm keeping things normal by asking for your Weekend Sales Ratings, just as I've done every spring since 2011. Of course, this is not a normal spring, so I don't expect the scores and anecdotal stories will be normal, either.

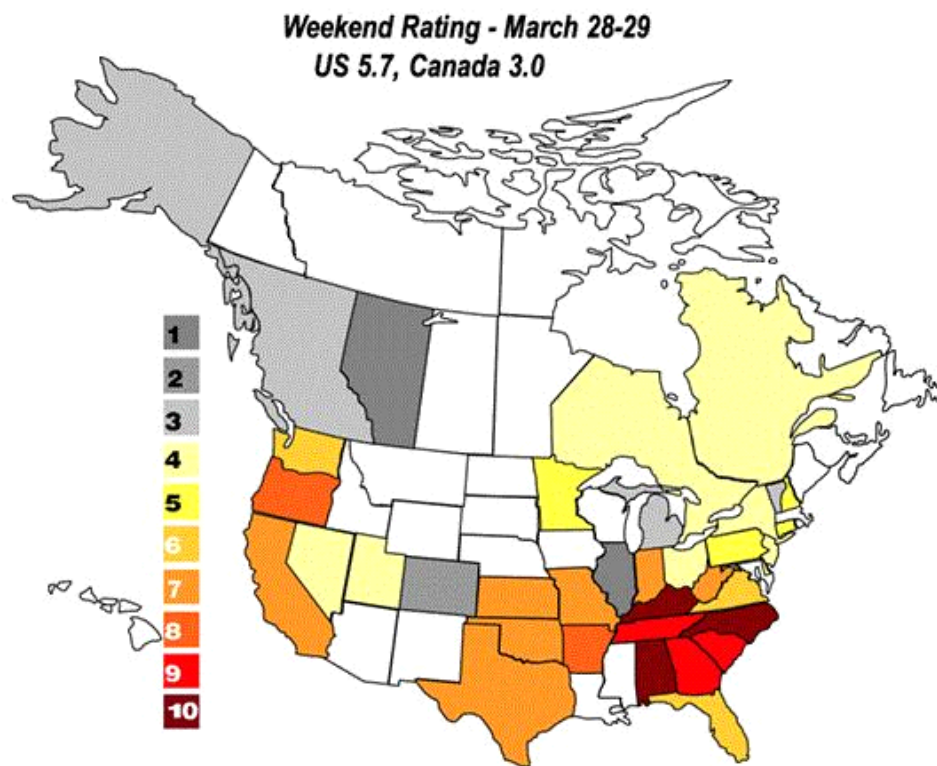
Given the pandemic situation, my Monday email to you asked for two things: First, a regular weekend sales rating, on a scale of 1 to 10, just like I always ask. We'll cover that first:

The U.S.: 5.7, Canada 3.0.

Is that good, bad or to be expected? Well, to be honest, I started a week sooner than usual, so it's a bit hard to tell. Normally, I'd start collecting scores the first week of April. Last year, that was April 6-7 and the scores were 7.2 U.S., 5.9 Canada. In 2018, the first week of April was Easter weekend and the scores were 5.3 U.S., 6.4 Canada. In 2017, the first weekend of April was April 1-2, so a pretty close comparison to this year; the scores then were 6.1 U.S., 4.2 Canada.

Given that, I'd say the U.S. didn't do too badly, while Canada was off considerably. Why? Perhaps less shipping of product south to the U.S.? I must also point out that I only got four scores from Canada, hardly enough representation for a fair score. Also, British Columbia, located in the mild Pacific Northwest, often gets Canada off to an early start; this weekend, it didn't. I got one score from BC and it was a dismal 1. Meanwhile, fellow Pacific Northwest states Washington (5.5) and Oregon (8) did decently well.

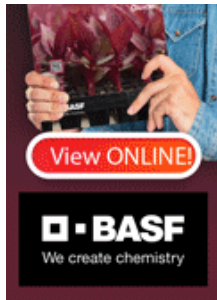
Here's the map:



The south was strong—record-breaking, even!

Pretty clear where spring has sprung, eh? The south scored a healthy 8.2, with the southeast portion of the region dominating that. You sent in six 10s—one each from Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

California scored a decent seven. Arizona didn't send in any scores, but my friend Tom Birt,



owner of Mesquite Valley Growers Nursery in Tucson, left me a voicemail (“I can’t type worth a crap” he joked) saying, “We’re just slammed. Everybody has been thanking us for staying open.” (More from Tom in a bit.)

Here are a few more comments from folks who had excellent weekends:

Abe VanWingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, North Carolina (he gave scores of 9 to North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio)—“*Perfect weather, stores open and operating, but with social distance rules. Product was there and ready to be bought. Veggie/herb sales 4X that of regular COMP (if sales were up 20%, veggie/herbs were up 80%). Everything else was normal.*”

Alex Van Der Hengst, South Central Growers, Tennessee (he scored Tennessee and Kentucky a 10)—“*Was it the biggest weekend we’ve ever had? Nope. However, for this time of the year and the uncertainty that is currently going around, sales were absolutely phenomenal. We needed a morale booster and this weekend’s weather gave us that.*”

B&C Nursery, Pace, Florida (10)—“*People are bored and want to work in their yard. Also, lots of people wanting to buy herbs, veggies, fruit and citrus trees.*”

Bryan Finison, Tree House Farm & Nursery, Northport, Alabama (10)—“*Friday broke a 10-year record for daily sales. Then Saturday broke that record by 1.5 times. The Mayor of Tuscaloosa (150,000 population) and Alabama’s Governor put out that non-essential businesses were closing Sunday, so many people thought we might be closed and I feel we had some panic sales. We shall see how sales go today and going forward.*”

Judy Mitchell, Mitchell’s Nursery & Greenhouse, King, North Carolina (10)—“*We broke all one-day sales records on Saturday. Friday was also great, only surpassed by Good Friday sales in a previous year. Beautiful weather in the 80s.*”

Kate MacLean in California (7)—“*Busy as heck. Mostly people looking for a project while in isolation. Building victory gardens. Lots of veggies and herb plants and seed. There was a mix of people buying shrubs and color to freshen up yards, too.*”

Kate added that customers still want to show her pictures of their yards on their phones. “Feels uncomfortable now to be close,” she said of the lack of social distancing when that happens. “So sad to me.”

It’s sad to me, too, Kate, to read about record-breaking sales that northern retailers might soon enjoy, were in not for forced shutdowns and reductions in footfalls.



“I would take a rainy Mother’s Day weekend any time over this.”

With my Weekend Sales Survey question, I added a 1-6 rating about how COVID-19 is impacting your business. I hoped to create a color-coded map showing the areas and degrees of impact. Alas, it didn’t work out, in part because my question was confusing to you. Plus, it’s a moving target, with some of you doing only online sales this week, but saying you’re adding drive-through pickup sales next week and so on. So forget the scoring system.

But you did send me some fascinating and insightful anecdotal information from where the rubber meets the road that paints a picture of what growers and retailers are experiencing and feeling. Here’s a sampling:

- I mentioned Tom Birt from Arizona. Tom’s voice mail said that they’re open, but taking all

precautions. They've closed their gift shop (non-essential) and are sanitizing carts and enforcing social distancing. On that question of whether or not garden centers are essential, Tom is instructing his staff if asked that by a customer to answer, "We're essential for the mental health of the country right now. It's springtime—there's so much need for people to feel better."

- In New Jersey, where the pandemic is hitting hard, Bill Swanekamp of wholesale grower Kube-Pak reported getting off to a strong start.

"Up until March 30, we were 12% ahead on sales of plugs, rooted cuttings and finished cold-weather plants. Today, we will now be even with last year at this time and the numbers are going in the opposite direction pretty quickly. Some landscapers are still planting, but others have shut down. Garden centers are struggling because the initial restrictions in New Jersey caused many garden centers to close. Some are re-opening, but not enough to absorb all the available product."

- Above, I mentioned getting a score of 1 from BC. That was from long-time ratings contributor Glenn Anderson of wholesale grower Nordic Plants in Abbotsford. Glenn wrote, "Many bookings cancelled and retailers real cautious to stock up. Time will tell if the spring will be a disaster or just one of the poorest in a long time. I would take a rainy Mother's Day weekend any time over this."

- Chris Baker of Baker's Acres in Ohio wrote: "We keep planting and growing in the event things will improve. The kids did a great job getting online shopping going. Stay healthy!"

- From Chris Williams of K&W Greenery in Wisconsin: "We are closed currently to the public. Our landscape division is out in the field doing work and we are doing phone sales of gift cards and we will do bulk mulch deliveries as of right now."

- From Dana Altum of Indiana: "Customers are happy we can provide flowers to them, sales same as last year this time. Some people comfortable with online ordering, some need hand-holding over the phone, mostly the older, non-computer customers."

- From Washington, where he scored the weekend a 7, David Vander Giessen explained, "Rain seems to be the main reason our weekend wasn't a blockbuster. Cool, damp and breezy conditions put a damper on sales for the weekend, but all things considered, we still had good sales and properly social-distanced foot traffic! Customers are grateful we're still open and are very respectful of keeping their distance from each other and our staff."

- From High Meadows Farm in Vermont: "Laid off most staff, on lockdown, can't ship or deliver to my retail accounts, they are on lockdown as well. Just want to salvage my costs at this point, may be a total loss ..."

- Long-time contributor Jeff Griff of Lowe's Greenhouse in Ohio had this to say: "It seems that over the past few years, our clientele have become more 'fair-weathered,' with fewer and fewer die-hards who will shop regardless of conditions. Now, with the pandemic, for many it is like walking through cut glass and hot coals to come into the store for pansies. Needless to say, not good for sales. Just like 911, this crisis will fundamentally change the way we live, the way we operate as a society ... and I'm not sure how that looks for us in the green industry."



No Flower Fields visitors this season

Paul Ecke III wrote in to tell me about business at The Flower Fields at Carlsbad Ranch, which his family still owns and operates. He wrote,

"We had to close the Flower Fields about 10 days ago, right after we opened on March 1. The flowers look wonderful and we were very much looking forward to opening up the U-pick Blueberry Patch (yes, full-sun blueberries and they taste great!). We are working on a way to pick the blueberries and give them to local food banks. And, of course, we have to manage the 100-acre farm. So, for the most part, this season will be a total bust. But, of course, we are not alone. Farmers are used to adversity and we will get through this, but like many, many business people, the timing could not be worse for us."



"We do hope that our wedding and event space will get some use when the COVID-19 crisis abates. And we are doing some filming to provide virtual tours. We are trying to promote the Flower Fields brand, so next year people will be anxious to visit when we reopen in March 2021."

"It is sad to see the flowers without people—last weekend we would probably have had 10,000 paying customers there. We will continue to show the American Flag made out of petunias that you can see from Palomar Airport Road (south side of the fields)."



He attached this picture of his daughter, Polly, at The Flower Fields, while home from her first year at University of Colorado-Boulder, where she's studying business.

Paul added that he's on the Board of the LA Flower Market and they had to close that last week as well.



In spite of it all, the life of a grower goes on

Beth Weidner, owner and grower at Weeds Weeds Greenhouse & Gardens in Tina, Missouri, wrote a long, heartfelt letter that started, "I have agonized, cussed, cried, lost sleep, wailed and gnashed my teeth over this current disaster in the making. I even had a stress pimple and cut my own bangs (which I do anyway, but it sounds so dramatic!)."

There's not enough space to print all of what she said, but she wrapped up with as good a philosophy as I've heard about how to deal with what we're dealing with:

"There is a mantra I have learned from kayak paddling and ultra-marathon racing on the Missouri River: 'Proceed as the way opens.' It's pretty easy to follow on the river, she forces you to do so. In business ... not so much. Usually one has much more control over how things 'proceed.' I will continue operating my business as normally as possible, for my own and my community's economic health, until officials tell me I can't. And then I'll figure out something else. It's not like these plants are shelf-stable or can be put in the freezer for later. I've got eight weeks, smack in the middle of a pandemic, to re-home several thousand plants."

And then Beth concluded her conclusion with something that made me smile—a reminder of just what a never-ending adventure a greenhouse owner's life is:

"Which reminds me: 34F, light frost and the furnace in my fully stocked, main warm-season greenhouse is not functioning. Always something."



IGCs vs. Big Box

Many of you would love me to publish a listing of states and whether or not IGCs can stay open. Unfortunately, that's beyond the scope of my ability to keep current. Your best bet is to stay in touch with your state's association or other garden centers to keep up with the news, which can change daily.

What I am seeing a lot of is the question of the unfairness of Big Box retailers being allowed to stay open—and sell plants—while independents get deemed non-essential and are forced to close or limit sales to online or sidewalk pickup only. Wrote Karen Wedel of Wedel's Garden Center in Kalamazoo, Michigan:

"It's very difficult being an independent garden center. Michigan's Governor said Lowe's and Menards are deemed essential ... Since they're open, they can sell their garden plants and products while we cannot. This is forcing our customers to go to them for their gardening needs.

Big business gets a win while small business suffers. And, of course, our growers are left to sell their products to these places so they do not have to lose product or employees. Sigh! If our stay-at-home order is extended, I'm not sure we will recover lost sales because April, May and June is when over two-thirds of our annual revenue comes in. I'm sure we aren't the only garden center to feel this way."

Maryland was facing just such a situation, and as far as I can tell, it's still not resolved.



Photo by Jacob Owens.

One of the state's wholesale growers, Jake Van Wingerden (above), wrote a letter to the Maryland Nursery, Landscape and Greenhouse Association, stressing that the industry needs to push for garden centers to be included in the list of "essential" retailers. Jake made these three points:

1. The Governor did not close retail businesses; he closed businesses that are deemed "non-essential." Many retail outlets are listed as essential in the guidance document that was released shortly after the governor's announcement. The interpretation that retail garden centers should close because they are "non-essential" is incorrect in my opinion and we should be working to get clarification on this subject in consultation with our lobbyist and lawyers.

2. Big Box retailers were listed as "essential." As anyone in this industry knows, the independent garden center's biggest competitors are Lowe's, Walmart and Home Depot. It is fundamentally unfair that the biggest corporations get to stay open in this crisis and the small business needs to close. This should be a point that is hammered home every chance we get. Maryland small businesses are being hurt while large corporations stay open and thrive.

3. Tidal Creek Growers has a very large vegetable and herb program. Almost all retail garden centers that we sell to have large sections of their stores dedicated to vegetable gardening.

The guidance that the Maryland Department of Agriculture released last week stated: "... Any business involved in food distribution, production, processing, sales and supply will be considered essential ... including ... greenhouses and nurseries ... retailers, including grocery stores ..." Retail garden centers that sell vegetable plants to customers are a part of this essential supply chain.

Well stated, Jake. Other states may want to use your arguments in favor of keeping IGCs essential.

Lowes' CEO on being classified "essential"

Here's a piece from the *Charlotte Business Journal* in which the author asked Lowes CEO Marvin Ellison, "How do you balance those essential needs with people who are looking at Lowe's as a destination to get out of the house?"

Marvin Ellison: "It is important. If you think about what I said, two-thirds of what we sell is non-discretionary. So even if a customer comes in our store to buy something to repair a leaking pipe and they decide that they want to buy a can of paint because they want to go outside and paint their deck, we think that's contributing to social distancing because the person's at home working on a project by themselves. They're not somewhere in a group. They're not in a crowded office building. They're at home. If a customer decides that they're going to be in the store and they're going to buy some seeds for their garden, we think that contributes to social distancing because they're out in their yard working at home and they're not out and about, which is what we're trying to prevent as an overall community to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. We're not encouraging customers to buy anything in particular. Whatever we sell that can keep them in their home, we think contributes to the whole goal of social distancing."



Good argument? Or lame justification? You tell me [HERE](#).



Bachman's got an exemption ... then didn't

Up in Minnesota, one IGC managed to get an exemption to the state's rules. Or at least thought they did.

THIS article in *Twin Cities Business* reported that Bachman's had asked for, and received, an exemption to the state's non-essential business rules. They planned to open on Monday, April 6. The article went on to talk about other IGCs who did not have such an exemption and that the Minnesota Nursery & Landscape Association was pushing for one.



Then there was an update to the article a day later:

"Editor's note: Proof of how quickly the news is moving and rules and regulations are changing, Bachman's received a call from the state Department of Agriculture on Thursday, April 2, saying the exemption it received to reopen was 'an accident.' Bachman's will not open on Monday, April 6. No-contact curbside pickup and delivery will continue."

Ironically, the date of the original article? April 1.

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“Like” our Spring Trials Facebook page!

The reason I didn't send this email until now is because the whole of last week was devoted to covering the California Spring Trials that never happened. Fellow Bobbleheads Ellen Wells, Jen Zurko, Bill Calkins and I have almost lived on Zoom meetings with various breeders who were scheduled to exhibit at CAST, gathering information about the new varieties they were planning on presenting. And if all goes to schedule, you'll be receiving daily *Acre's of Buzz* newsletters this week ... maybe you already have!



Another way to keep up with our Spring Trials coverage is via our [Spring Trials Facebook page](#), which Digital Editor Bill Calkins is updating almost instantly with the new stuff we've been learning about. Check it out and if you like it ... well “like” it with the like button. And share with your friends and colleagues who need the lowdown on the newest new flowers and plants.

Oh, and for more photo-heavy coverage, check us out on [Instagram](#). We are @growertalksgreenprofit. #CAST2020



Finally I ...



From Scotland, via Ball Colegrave, comes this picture of a “Florainbow of Hope,” created by Scottish grower Gary Young and his family at A&G Young, along with some other key members of the Scottish industry, who used 27,000 flowers that were destined for the compost heap to say, “We in the Scottish industry have come together to create something—a message of hope for all that are suffering.

“The growing and the planting of plants is one of the most optimistic things people can do—plant with the expectation for future reward, we all plant for tomorrow. Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow, don’t stop thinking about your garden.”

The picture, posted on Ball Colegrave’s Facebook page, has been shared 491 times, and the story was picked up by the national press, including the *Scottish Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and the *Daily Express*.

Finally II ...

The Flower Council of Holland is launching a floral program in Germany, France, the Netherlands and the UK with the message: “Let Hope Bloom.” It will feature advertisements in daily papers, and via online and social media. The goal is “to show people that flowers will always be there, and give hope to the countries and people who are being hit hard. Everyone can share this floral message via social media with the universal message #lethopebloom.” FCH is making available posters, social media images and [THIS VIDEO](#) to help support the effort.

The floral message is made from more than 200,000 stems of flowers.

Finally III ...



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