

“We Will Run Out of Plants Before We Run Out of Spring”



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FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2020

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# GrowerTalks' Acres Online

News and Commentary from GrowerTalks Magazine

## COMING UP THIS WEEK:

How was Mother's Day?  
- Weather? What weather?  
- Speaking of the PNW ...  
- Speaking of Canada ...  
Why are we so popular?  
Bonnie Plants on new gardeners  
People stopped & shopped!  
IGC Show 2020 cancelled  
Darwin Days to go virtual  
Finally ...



**How was Mother's Day?**

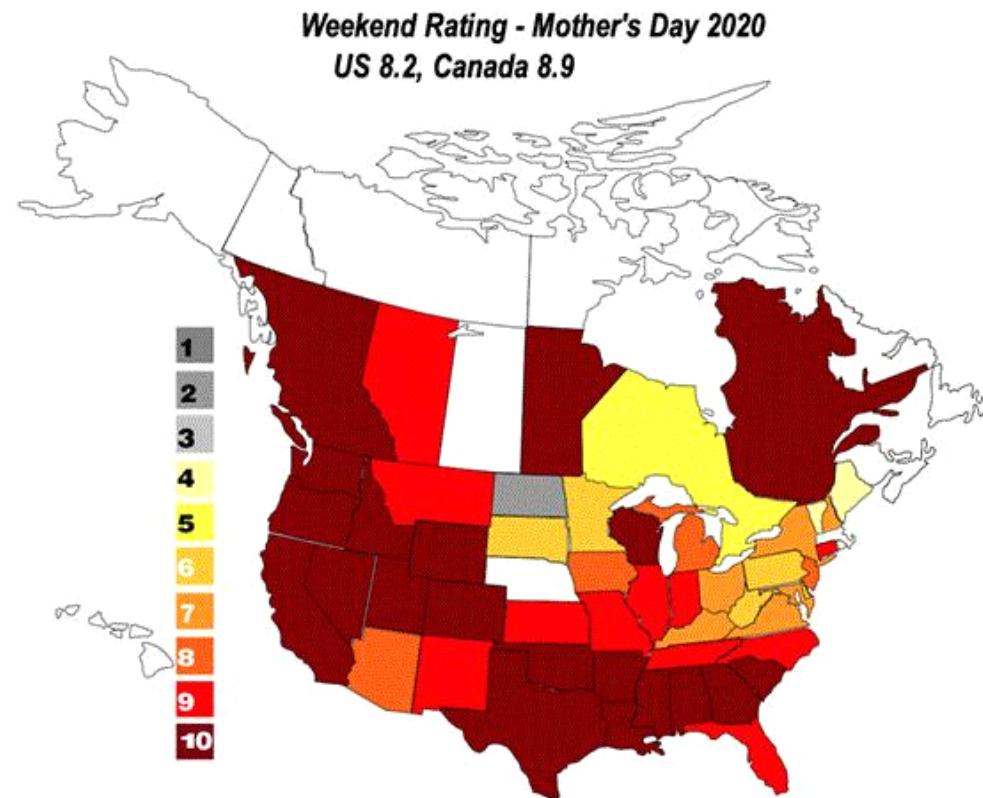


Mother's Day Weekend (or week, since you're telling me every day is a Saturday) ran the gamut from dismal to over-the-top fantastic, 10+++ (one woman in Florida scored it a 20 because they did double the business as the best-ever day in 20 years). But somebody in Michigan gave it a goose egg (which I rounded up to 1, since that's my lowest score) because they only saw two customers all day due to terrible weather).

The national averages? **8.2 in the U.S. and 8.9 in Canada**—a very fine Mother's Day compared to the past nine years of survey data:

'19	7.6/8.2
'18	8.8/9.5
'17	7.8/8.3
'16	8.3/8.4
'15	8.2/9.4
'14	7.9/7.7
'13	7.5/7.1
'12	8.3/9.5
'11	7.8/6.4

Here's the map:



That's based on 131 scores from 45 states and five provinces. You sent in 64 10s—that's 49% of you, which is even higher than the 44% of 10s from Mother's Day 2018, which was the best on record. To me that means that the cold, wet weather than hit the upper portion of the country prevented 2020 from being completely and totally record-breaking.



## Weather? What weather?

Even with the rotten conditions, customers still turned out for many of you. Here are some comments about that:

New Hampshire (10): "Best day in 49 years of business on Saturday despite 38F, snow, sleet and 50-mph wind. Topped the day on Sunday."

Connecticut (10): "If only the weather wasn't so cold and windy it would have been a 12.5. Veggies are the new toilet paper!"

Virginia (10): "Unusually cold, freezing weather, but robust sales. Very pleased."

Tennessee (9): "Way above last year and way above projections even though it was record-breaking cold! I gave it a 9 because we were a mess, with tender plants crammed into every nook and cranny of the greenhouse. Of course, we got a load of tropicals Friday morning when we had a frost predicted. Our average last frost is April 6, by the way."

Ohio (8): "In spite of a 25F night on Friday and 2 inches of snow Saturday morning, we had a full parking lot all weekend and very good sales. Far from record sales numbers, but we really feel we had more traffic due to the pandemic and did very well in spite of the worst Mother's Day weather I can remember ... which is saying a lot because I'm old!"

Alberta, Canada (9): "The gardeners were out ... even with sleet falling from the sky."

And here's one place that, oddly, reported a heat wave:

"We are just south of Seattle, Washington. Weather was 80F, so hot for our area. On a scale of 1 to 10, our weekend was a 15! Highest sales day on record on Saturday."

Not everybody had such great results, however, and I hate reading the sad stories of dismal sales. I counted 22 scores of 6 or below (17%). State- and province-wise, they're scattered around amongst the 9s and 10s, so it's not a matter of weather hurting an entire region, it's a matter of being able to conduct business in the bad weather—and having a customer base that's willing to shop in the rain and cold. That said, New England (6.0) and the Plains (6.1) were the two low-scoring regions. In Canada, Ontario scored just 5.3.



## Speaking of the Pacific Northwest ...

As a region, it scored a perfect 10—three 10s from Washington and two from Oregon. Combine that with British Columbia (more on Canada below) and you're talking perfection—the garden spot of the continent (at least for now).

## Speaking of Canada ...

If I drop Ontario out of Canada, the rest of the country would have scored—get this—9.8. That's because all seven scores from BC, Manitoba and Quebec were 10s. Alberta sent in the lone 9.

BC had five perfect 10s—perhaps the most perfect scores from any single location I've received. I guess it was a nice weekend, eh?

Ontario scored 3, 7 and 6 for that 5.3 average. But that said, at least they're able to open for business, and I suspect the province will bust loose when the weather eases up.

Here's an interesting note about business in Ontario from regular correspondent Joanna Steckles, who scored it a 7 (she also provided the clever quote I used for my subject line this week):

*Friday was windy with temps at about 33F and by Saturday we had several inches of snow, plus it was still coming down. Did I mention it was cold? And we are closed Sunday. As I write, there is again snow coming down, big flakes that would get the kids excited if it was November.*

*But shoppers did come. I think the weather helped us a bit with crowd control; only a few times did we ask someone to wait outside because we were at our self-imposed capacity (two from one household, max five parties. We are just under 9,000 sq. ft.).*

*People are wonderfully understanding. We are adjusting to the distancing thing and also to the attitude change from ... shall I call it from service to being in charge? We aren't asking people to follow the arrows, we are telling them. And we will remind them if that's what it takes. No vulnerable elderly person is to feel threatened here if we can help it. 99.9% are very good about it. We have heard of several greenhouses/garden centers being shut down because of a complaint and let's not have it happen here.*

*Total so far indicates we will run out of plants before we run out of spring.*



## Why are we so popular right now?

In a few cases this week, when one of you sent me an extremely good score and positive message, I replied back with: "Why? What do you think is behind the demand?" Here are two answers:

From Dave Holley, Moss Greenhouses, Idaho:

1. *The weather has been excellent. We have had an early spring and unseasonably warmer weather for the month of April and so far in May. The weekends have been nearly perfect. It is really refreshing to have a weather pattern go your way when it hasn't been so kind to us the previous few seasons.*

2. *I also think there is pent-up demand. Out here (Idaho) people are used to hiking, camping, fishing ... just getting out in general. With shelter in place and many businesses shut down, a trip to the local garden center is a perfect way to escape for a while and spend some of that money, which might have gone elsewhere.*

*I also have to think we as an industry in Idaho were on top of communications with our elected officials early on in the shutdown process, which included a few conversations with the Governor (we are, after all, a heavy agriculture state), explaining why garden centers needed to be an "essential" business. This was a major win for independent garden centers in being able to keep their doors open.*

*With that said, there has been consternation from some consumers on why we are profiting from a pandemic when everyone should just stay home. We have also seen congeniality and just being a decent human being fly out the window when someone is asked to adhere to social distancing guidelines or when we have run out of product. I have never seen so many anger issues directed to a wholesale grower in my over 30 years in the business. It is disheartening at times.*

*Gardening is a social experience and can be enjoyed by the entire family, and when the family can learn together to grow beautiful flowers and many of the vegetables they eat, I can't help but think it is a win for our industry.*

From Glenn Andersen, Nordic Nurseries, Abbotsford, British Columbia:

*With most retail businesses being closed and people staying home, it looks like everyone wants a garden this year. Very few businesses are open except grocery stores, hardware stores and garden centers. Potting soil sales are way up, which tells me that a lot of new gardeners are buying plants, too. And I would rather spend my time in a garden center than a grocery store. Let's hope all these new gardeners are successful and catch the gardening bug for future years.*



## New gardeners? Bonnie Plants knows how many

I talked with Bonnie Plants President and CEO Mike Sutterer earlier this week to see if he could quantify the increased demand for veggies and herbs. After all, the Union Springs, Arkansas, company has 80 growing facilities in 41 states and covers more of the market (49 states) with more product than maybe every other vegetable grower combined.

Mike told me that Bonnie's has been doing consumer research since late March, when the crisis started to amplify. They wanted to understand how the crisis was impacting consumer behavior—what they were buying, what they intended to buy.

"What we've seen through that research is some 16 million brand new vegetable gardeners have entered the category just in the last eight weeks since the crisis started," Mike stated. "A staggering number of people entering the category."



Masked shoppers at a Bonnie's display in Home Depot.

The benefit to Bonnie's is "probably five-plus years' worth of category growth in one year," he added. Additionally, they found that about 35% of existing vegetable customers say they're dedicating more space to plant extra vegetables and are buying more than they typically would. The appeal appears universal, with no part of the country left behind, from the Southwest, where temperatures have already exceeded 100F, to the Northeast, hardest-hit by the pandemic.

"We're going to co-opt the Postal Service motto: Neither rain nor snow nor sleet, etc. will keep people from buying tomato plants this year," Mike joked.

As for keeping those new and existing veggie gardeners engaged and buying next season, Mike cites Bonnie's partnership with the non-profit [AmpleHarvest.org](#) and the [Grow More, Feed More campaign](#), which encourages home gardeners to donate their surplus vegetable harvest to food pantries across the country. In addition, Bonnie's is donating 5% of sales of vegetable plants from [bonnieplants.com](#) from May 1 to July 31 to Ample Harvest.

"Our goal is to get 10 million pounds of fresh vegetables donated directly from home gardens to local food pantries across the nation," Mike says.

And proving they practice what they preach, Bonnie Plants has converted their test gardens in Union Springs, Alabama, and Marysville, Ohio, into Harvest Gardens, donating all the vegetables to local food pantries in those communities.

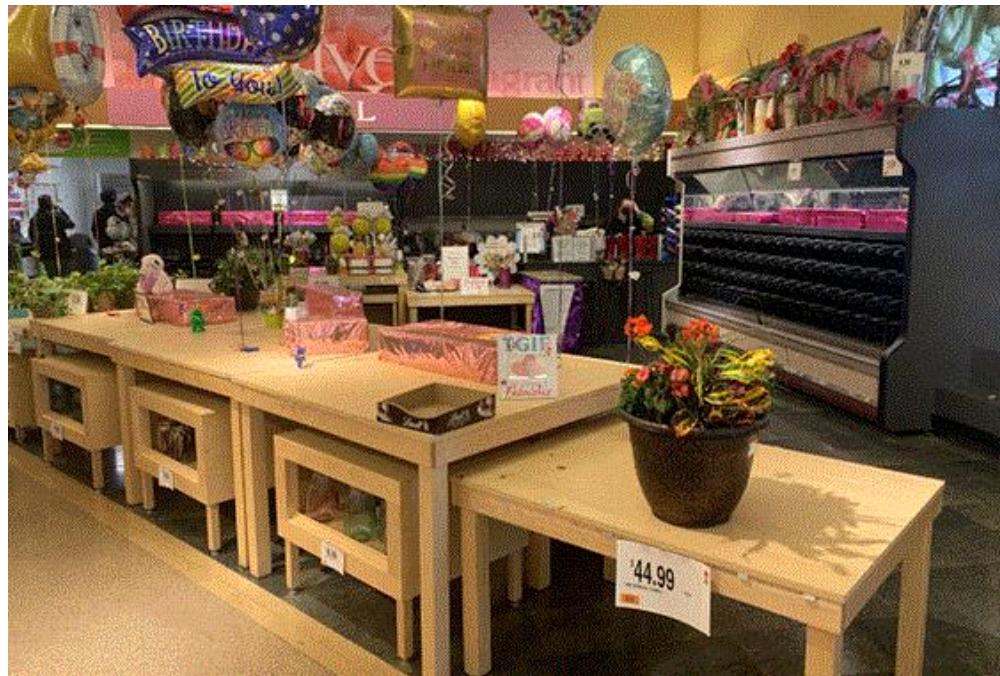
Nice, Mike! That's something any garden center can promote and get behind, not only as an encouragement and incentive to gardeners new and experienced, but just because it's a really good thing.



## People Stopped & Shopped, alright!

Fred Gloeckner's Andrew Lee sent me some photos from his local grocery store that tell the tale of flower demand for mom. Wrote Andrew:

"Man, was it humming for Mother's Day, at least in Connecticut! Here are three photos of a Super Stop & Shop in Norwalk (meaning one of their big properties). I stopped in Mother's Day morning at 10:00 a.m. and couldn't buy any flowers —potted plants, annuals, perennials, cut flowers, etc. —everything had been purchased except one mixed container. The shelves were bare!"





## IGC Show 2020 cancelled

Tough news to hear, but not surprising, as Illinois is being extra conservative with its relaxing of the shelter-in-place order. IGC Show 2020 was slated for August 11-13 at Chicago's McCormick Place. But by then there will be no way the city will allow large gatherings and so co-founders Jeff and Cheryl Morey made the decision to postpone the event until 2021, when it will yet again be held in Chicago in August.

Wrote Jeff and Cheryl in the official announcement, "We are extremely disappointed not to be able to offer the experience, inspiration, insights and connections so many in our Indie community have come to rely on with our event.

"Not having IGC Show this year is disappointing. Still, our enthusiasm for IGCs is stronger than ever thanks to the outpouring of support and encouragement we have had over the last month from retailers and exhibitors alike. We know that with your engagement and support, the 2021 IGC Show will be the best one yet. We have a number of major surprises that we think you'll be excited to hear about!"



IGC Show 2019 was a big success, but the state of Illinois won't allow those big crowds for a while.

If you've registered to attend the show, they'll apply that registration to IGC Show 2021 automatically. If you've registered for either the educational conference or Monday store tour, you'll receive a special bonus of one additional free ticket per event. You may use the offer to bring along a business associate, employee or industry friend.

### **Darwin Perennials Day goes digital**

Yet another announcement that an event will go virtual rather than live due to COVID-19: Ball Horticultural Company's Darwin Perennials Day, slated for June 17, is being turned into a week of fun and education called Darwin Digital Days. It will be held online during the week of June 15-19. That's because there's no way Illinois is going to allow gatherings of more than 50 people by that time.



Darwin Digital Days will include opportunities for video tours of its Zone-5 perennial gardens in The Gardens at Ball, educational opportunities with key perennial suppliers, interactive keynote speakers, and more chances to ask questions and get answers on the newest genetics in the perennial industry.

Visit [www.DarwinPerennials.com](http://www.DarwinPerennials.com) for more details as they're finalized and to catch up on the new products launched for 2021.



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### Finally ...

I could fill a newsletter with the feel-good stories coming out of our industry, but I'll pick just one to share, which comes to me from Craig Revere of HC Companies, manufacturer of a wide range of nursery container brands, including Dillen-ITML, Kord, Amerikan and Listo.

Craig says HC's customer service department got a letter from a consumer in Emeryville, California, who normally buys a big selection of HC's colorful plastic pots from her local Home Depot. The only problem is, they won't deliver the pots to her this spring.

To make the story compelling, the letter writer is Ann Petru, who calls herself "the succulent whisperer"—she loves rescuing broken or discarded succulents, reviving them, then giving them away.

Her day job? She's a physician at the local children's hospital where she's in charge of infection control. "So you can imagine that I might be a bit busy nowadays," she wrote. She told HC she's in the "older" category and doesn't want to get out and expose herself to the virus when she's not working the usual 60 to 70 hours at the hospital.



Ann's ask: Could she order some pots directly from HC?

Naturally, HC did better than that: They hooked her up with almost 60, in sizes from 8 in. to 20 in., and in Ann's favorite colors: peridot, peacock and red. So expect the succulent whisperer to continue sharing her love of plants while she's helping heal the world.



Remember, be positive, but test negative!

Chris

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