

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Why 2020 Might Not Be a Fluke

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I think the No. 1 question on the industry's mind right now is, "Was 2020's successful spring a pandemic fluke, never to be repeated? Or can we carry some of our industry's popularity over to next season and beyond?"

It's a good question and a challenging one to answer. First, I think a lot of folks who shopped with us this spring, especially first-timers, bought houseplants and patio pots to spruce up their indoor and outdoor spaces while they were locked down, and they don't necessarily define themselves as "gardeners" because of it. They might be one-time purchasers.

Second, there's no precedent that I can think of for the 2020 season. The Great Recession of 2007-2009 is the closest we have; that's when the "staycation" was invented, and instead of traveling, consumers bought our "cheap-and-cheerful" products to spruce up their homes and gardens. But

they didn't buy them in record numbers like they did this year. Plus, the landscape market collapsed due to lack of new construction and many woody ornamental nurseries went out of business.

So really, what do we have to go by when looking for the answer to our question? Retailer garden center owner Jessie Jacobsen has the best idea I've heard. Jessie is owner of Tonkadale Greenhouse in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and she brought it up during an online panel discussion I was moderating for BFG.

Said Jessie of 2021, "I think we have the advantage right now, where there is this building demand from consumers because gardening—the trend—is happening outside of us, without us having to do much to bring them in ... I think there's going to be momentum—maybe not pandemic-like momentum—but I think the current climate is right for gardening, and I think it's just going to continue to be new and exciting for that next generation of gardeners."

Bingo! Jessie is exactly right: When consumers found themselves locked down at home with little to do and no place open to eat or drink or be entertained, they discovered (or rediscovered) their local garden center. We weren't running billboards saying, "Pandemic: The perfect time to garden" or radio ads saying, "Buy tomato plants at Bob's Nursery so your family doesn't starve." Quite the contrary: We were hunkered down, wondering if there would even be a spring!

But consumers, in their infinite wisdom or through a genetic disposition toward biophilia, knew that plants are the antidotes to many of the tumultuous emotions they were experiencing. And because of that, we attracted an estimated 16 million to 20 million new gardeners to the fold (not to mention the existing customers who bought more

than usual).

Now we have to hope they liked what they found. And I think many of them will. Think about it: the same thing happened to every one of us at a certain point in our lives, and we liked plants and gardening enough to make a career of it. Why wouldn't many of them get bitten by the bug hard enough to at least continue on with a veggie garden, some houseplants and a spruced-up landscape?

What you can do to help that along is make sure your business is as warm and welcoming as possible, and that your benches are stocked with great plant material. Fine-tune your social distancing and sanitation protocols, tidy up the Plexiglas shields and other make-shift barriers you shoved up in haste last April. Freshen up any tired or uninspiring pandemic-related signage and make sure your staff is smiling under their masks.

One other inspiring thought from Jessie: "There's probably a lot of unrealized potential out there as far as your capacity, what you can push through, bringing in extra product, confidence ... I think there was untapped potential that has just been unleashed."

Amen, Jessie! If there's a common thread among every business, it's how their staffs pulled together to do amazing things under circumstances not faced in our lifetimes.

With that in mind, there's no reason 2021 shouldn't be an excellent season. **GT**