

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Chill, Dude

Chris Beytes



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My biggest worry for 2021 has been that when restaurants, theaters and sports arenas open back up, post-COVID, folks who'd been stuck at home growing tomatoes and tending to their new houseplants will forget about gardening and leave us hanging with greenhouses and garden centers full of product. But based on conversations I've had recently with industry insiders who are vastly smarter than me, I should be more sanguine (meaning, "Chill, dude, it's gonna be fine!").

One such expert is Mike Sutterer, CEO of Bonnie Plants, one of the country's biggest nursery operations and probably the biggest supplier of consumer veggie gardening plants in the world. A while back, I emailed Mike to see if he'd give his perspective on behalf of Bonnie Plants for 2021. Here's his reply:

"At Bonnie, we're extremely bullish on 2021. We view what happened in 2020 not as a one-year blip, but as a new 'Foundation for the Future.' For years, many publications in the industry have written countless articles wondering if, how and when the 'next generation' is going to engage in gardening. Well, in 2020, they finally did—in a big way! Over 20 million new gardeners entered the gardening category in 2020, with the majority being under 35.

"The great news for our industry is that they generally had positive experiences that will carry them into 2021 and beyond. Our research at Bonnie suggests that over 80% of these new gardeners are going to be back in 2021—regardless of what happens with COVID—with many of them planning to grow more than they did in 2020. They found extremely positive benefits to growing plants in 2020 that went far beyond panic buying. They connected with nature, were able to share an activity with their kids, found a release from the stress of everyday life, create beauty in and around their homes, and grow something fresh to eat—all powerful motivators to bring them back in 2021.

"I think 2021 is an opportunity for us to solidify this new behavior with these new gardeners and ensure that it becomes a habit that they look forward to year after year into the future. While some things may change in 2021 that will impact how we go about our business (like everyone working remotely, making Tuesdays feel like Saturday in the garden center), once-in-a-generation opportunity created in 2020 has provided much momentum for 2021."

That does make me feel a bit better, Mike. Thanks!

Another smart guy is Bisser Georgiev, founder and CEO of LiveTrends Design Group (and now LiveTrends Design Group Europe). I've known Bisser since his Hermann Engelmann days and I've always respected his instincts. I

mean, when you consider he started LiveTrends in 2013 basically selling little plants in trendy little pots, and it's now a multi-million dollar multinational juggernaut, you know he's got the ability to see what others miss.

Bisser's take on 2021? He tells me "home-centered spending," as he calls it, is going to remain not just for 2021, but even post-COVID, when a vaccine has put the worst of the pandemic behind us and we're free to travel and go out to dinner and all that fun stuff.

"I think this year of 2020 has probably changed our psyche about being out much and hanging out in places," he says. "People are going to be scared. And this generation is going to remember this year forever."

He says the biggest winners from 2020 were health products, fitness, alcohol, makeup and home décor in the form of plants and landscaping.

"Those things won't change," he forecasts. "I don't think [demand for our product is] going to slow down," he says. "I believe that the stay-at-home industry is going to increase."

Whew! Two positive outlooks for 2021. And I've heard others, as well.

Does that mean 2021 will be smooth sailing? No. The plant business never is. There's still weather and input shortages and pest outbreaks and finding, keeping and affording labor. Bisser's big concerns are supply chain management and margins.

"It's all about whose got a good supply chain, not who's the smartest marketer or the best salesperson," he told me.

But we're used to worrying about all those things. If demand for our products is there, and even reasonably strong, that's one less thing to sweat about. **GT**