

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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A View From Down Under

Anthony Tesselaar



(Editor's note: Abe VanWingerden is taking some time off, so we thought we'd do something different and ask green industry business owners from around the world for their take on what's going on in their specific markets. Enjoy!—JZ)

The pandemic has hit us all. Around the world, wherever we operate, it has pushed our industry off-balance. Over the last two or so years, we've all experienced the effects locally: what follows is my view of what's been happening here in Australia. I've also added a few thoughts on where I think we're going next on this pandemic-fueled journey.

When COVID hit, Australia watched events unfolding around the world. And because we were far away and on an island, on March 20, 2020, we closed our borders. The hope was to keep COVID out or at least the number of cases down. While we waited for a vaccine, we wrestled with rising numbers by locking down further, state by state and city by city.

Living in Melbourne, we were asked to support one of the toughest and longest running set of restrictions: masks on, everyone was sent home. We couldn't travel more than 3 miles from our front doors. We were allowed out only to get food or medical support and only one person could leave the home once each day.

With retail stores closed and much of the workforce locked in at home, horticultural production nurseries responded by reducing their output during what was our southern winter. Things looked grim, but then as spring approached, a slight tweak to the restrictions arrived just in time to boost the horticulture industry. The government lockdowns were loosened to allow people more freedom. Yes, we were still locked inside "Fortress Australia" and prevented from travelling. We were still asked to stay close to home, but we were allowed to shop in the big box stores.

Now that the public had access to plants, the market went crazy—a gardening boom was born. If Australians couldn't travel, visit family and friends, go to the movies or eat in restaurants, then at least we could get out into the garden and make our homes a nicer place to spend all our time in.

By 2021, I'd say gardening was one of the only dependable feel-good, healthy activities many Australians could get involved with simply because our lockdowns were on and off again with shifting rules. But no one stopped people from gardening, especially at a time when the nation's mental health was in a shocking state. Gardening really took off.

It brought in a lot of people who'd never bought plants or had taken any major interest in gardening previously.

Thanks to those people who'd weathered the lockdowns in apartments, indoor plant sales took off big time. Vegetable seedlings were snapped up, almost as they were delivered to the box stores. This was the same with virtually all plants—trees, seedlings, perennials. Producers could not keep up with the demand. It was, for most in the industry, their biggest sales year for as long as they could remember.

And then 2022 rolled around and things have shifted again. I'm not alone in watching two factors that may affect sales and therefore should inform grower volumes. I'd be wary of expecting another bumper year as fat as the one just past and this is why: our lockdown has been lifted and Russia has invaded the Ukraine.

The first is easy to appreciate. After being locked in for so long we're keen to have fun further afield. Australians are driving north in droves, seeking the tropical heat, or we're hopping on a plane or boarding a cruise ship and leaving Australia altogether. If we're staying put, we're now spending our time and money at cafés and restaurants with family and friends because at last we can.

As for the war in the Ukraine, though we're physically a long way away, like the rest of the world we're watching and waiting to see what the effect may have on our economy and also our industry.

So finally a few stray points: We estimate the pandemic led to a 25% to 30% increase in people gardening in some form or another. The pandemic also led to an urban exit trend, where people who'd suffered being confined in smaller spaces have moved out, often to a country setting with larger houses and blocks with bigger gardens. And of those people who discovered the joy of gardening during the pandemic, we expect a portion to retain it as a lifelong pastime.

How many is anyone's guess, but the challenge for us as an industry is how to keep these new customers now that we have competing interest for their money and time once again. **GT**

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