

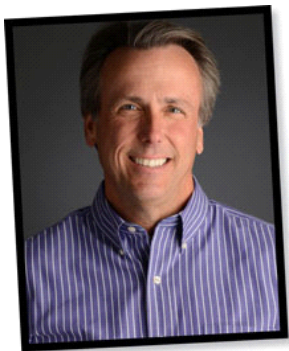
GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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I Think We've Answered the Question

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

Last month in this space I talked about how nervous much of the industry has been about going into spring with the economy boasting both high interest rates and high inflation—and having just come out of a global pandemic, too. Plus, labor rates and input costs are up massively, and we've raised prices more in the last two years than we had in the last 20. Would our gardening customers show up this spring? Have we become too much of a luxury?

Well, we're a month further into the season than last time (I'm writing this the Friday before Mother's Day), so let's continue the discussion.

George J. Ball published Volume 1, Number 1 of *GrowerTalks* in May 1937, two years before World War II would bring an end to the Great Depression. You now hold in your hand Volume 87, Number 2, meaning that we (meaning the industry) have survived an awful lot in the 20th and 21st centuries: The Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, the birth of suburbia, the offshoring of cut flowers, assorted oil embargos and gas shortages, rampant inflation, double-digit interest rates, 9/11, 13 recessions (according to Wikipedia), and the coronavirus pandemic. Also phone booth stuffing, beatniks, shag carpeting and New Coke. Holy cow!

In fact, not only have we survived, we've thrived. You remember Victory Gardens? Staycations? Pandemic home offices and home-school gardens? As an industry, we've proven to be war-proof, recession-proof and pandemic-proof. And now—at least based on what you've been telling me thus far this spring—I think it's safe to say we're inflation- and high-interest-rates-at-the-same-time- proof, too.

That's been your concern going into this spring: Will consumers buy plants when inflation and mortgage rates are both at 7%—double what they've been for the past decade or more? And adding to the mix, did shoppers overindulge on us during the pandemic? Are they tired of plants and ready to instead invest in travel and experiences? Are 4-in. annuals at \$7.99 instead of \$4.99 the last straw?

The answer seems to be no, no and no. In my weekly spring sales survey, readers from around the U.S. and Canada have been telling me that, provided the weather is decent, customers are coming out in droves and spending without hesitation, and sometimes at record levels. For proof, here's a random selection of comments from my surveys for the last weekend of April and the first weekend of May:

"It was an amazing weekend! Very busy! The forecast for the next two weeks looks great and that is most likely the reason why it was so busy!"—Ontario, Canada

"The weather finally broke and people are ready to plant. Sales almost matched last year when it was Mother's Day Weekend."—Ohio

"How do we even do this level of sales? Seriously? It's not even Mother's Day yet and I am frickin' exhausted."—Tennessee

"Our weekend is Friday and Saturday (because we are closed Sunday) and we had the best two days ever! Thankful for our hardworking employees!"—Illinois

"May 5 and 6 was a record for non-Mother's Day first weekend of May."—Michigan

"Sun and heat make a big difference. Almost COVID-like sales."—British Columbia, Canada

"We had our biggest April Saturday EVER, and I give all the credit to the first days of sunshine and 75F weather all year falling on a Friday and Saturday. As has been said many times in these reports, in this business it's all about the weather, and we certainly felt it last weekend!"

—Washington

"It's all about the weather"

... Yes, we know that, but this year I believe it's being confirmed. In spite of the questionable economy, when the weather is good, customers are buying our products—and sometimes breaking records when doing so.

Which leads to a question: Does good weather guarantee success?

Of course not! If you don't "work smarter AND harder" (as Mike Rowe of "Dirty Jobs" preaches), you're eventually doomed. This business is tough and getting tougher. Quality products, inspired displays, smart and attentive staff, excellent marketing ... all these are table stakes. But if you stayed in business through any of the calamities listed above, you already know that.

As I ruminate on how to wrap up this piece, another question occurred to me: Is there any scenario in which we would find ourselves NOT failure-proof?

A giant meteorite would be bad ... **GT**