



# Up and running – online

For retailers, an unfortunate pandemic accelerates the trend towards online ordering

BY JON BELL

**I**T'S MAY, THE MONTH of Mother's Day and, typically, the peak season for garden centers and nurseries in Oregon and around the Northwest. It's the month when Americans usually spend close to \$1.9 billion on flowers to honor their moms and when pastime gardeners usually pack garden centers to stock up on the plants that will enhance their landscapes at home.

But this May is not like the traditional May.

All throughout the spring, the COVID-19 pandemic has been wreaking havoc on the horticulture industry. Wholesale and retail nurseries in Oregon have been allowed to remain open so long as they abide by social distancing guidelines.

But the big in-person events and sales that usually pop up this time of year in the weekends leading up to and beyond Mother's Day? Those aren't happening.

"That surge of business is something that happens every year," said Sid Raisch, president of Horticultural Advantage, an Ohio-based garden and retail consultancy. "Most all garden centers and retail nurseries have full parking lots and are maxed out on Mother's Day weekend, to the point they couldn't do any more business without more parking. With those social distancing rules in

place during the peak of sales, it's going to be impossible to do that all day long."

The result will likely be a sizable ding to nurseries and garden centers who were counting on the traditional bump that comes with the spring season. But it might also do something that's been somewhat slow to come to the horticulture industry in recent years: push nurseries and garden centers to beef up their e-commerce offerings.

Even before COVID-19, those nurseries and garden centers who didn't offer much of an online presence, especially a shopping one, were leaving money on the table from customers who prefer to shop on the web. When the virus struck, all but eliminating in-store shopping for many in the horticulture industry, not having a remote and digital way for customers to buy plants only compounded the situation.

Now more than ever, retail and wholesale nurseries, as well as garden centers, are facing the reality that they've got to be online for their customers.

"This has definitely lit a fire under people and it's a mad scramble just to get a simple web store up," Raisch said. "That's not an undoable thing, but it's not everything." »»

### A reluctant bunch

Just by their very nature, plants are one of the remaining holdouts in the shift to online retail shopping. People still seem to prefer to see a plant or a tree in person before they buy it. There are also storage and shipping logistics involved with plants that aren't at issue with other goods, such as books or technology devices.

And folks who work in the retail nursery and garden center business have historically been focused more on in-person interactions than they have been on robust websites for their businesses.

“For a lot of garden centers and nurseries, there's just not a focus or interest in technology,” said Ron McCabe, president of Everbearing Services, a Portland, Oregon marketing agency that specializes in the horticulture industry. “They'd rather be out in their garden or in the nursery.”

While there's still some truth to that, there's no denying that the demand for online shopping for just about anything has picked up as the technology and customer experience have improved. That's also been evident in the garden center and retail nursery sectors, which have long been fueled by in-store and hard copy catalogue transactions.

“The traditional catalog ordering demographic is older, but now we've got this big influx of young people into the space,” said Megan Hansen, founder of Plant Lust, an online marketplace where nurseries can either list information and inventory or even sell products to consumers. “A lot of nurseries didn't have websites or e-commerce. It was expensive and it's not their core skill set. But we've got this big influx of young people who are into gardening. Those people are not going to paper. They're looking for

things that are on social media and mobile.”

There are barriers, however. Cost is a big one, and not just for creating a website with an online shopping component, but maintaining it as well.

Maurice Horn, co-owner of **Joy Creek Nursery** in Scappoose, Oregon, said his nursery started out as a mail-order business that only slowly grew to offer a retail component. Eventually, the nursery put up a fairly simple mail-order website that showed which plants were in stock and let consumers make purchases online. Later, they worked with a company to develop a more sophisticated site, but it became too costly to ever launch.

“Our well ran dry,” Horn said. “We needed to keep the plants alive.”

### Other challenges

Brent Markus owns **Conifer Kingdom**, a Silverton, Oregon-based

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conifer nursery that sells largely online. He's been through three online shopping platforms and five website redesigns since launching in 2012, and he's about to switch to a fourth platform.

He said in addition to the costs of launching and maintaining a site, plant inventory sales can be more complicated than products in other industries. For example, with plants you also have to consider things like pot size, a plant's height in the pot and other factors.

And then there's shipping.

"It's difficult to ship perishable goods, period," Markus said.

Some garden center and retail nurseries may also have been reluctant to fully embrace the web for fear that they'd be cutting down in-person visits to their locations, thus missing out on potential sales. McCabe said those fears are largely

unfounded if the center or nursery offers a pickup service.

"That way you still get them to come into the store," he said.

There also may be some reluctance to direct customers online because the experience might not be as enjoyable as coming into a store and talking to a knowledgeable, well-trained staff member. Raisch said people do enjoy coming into garden centers and nurseries — folks visited them immediately after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks for a sense of peace, he said — but there are lots of companies who've perfected the online shopping experience. One in particular: Amazon.

"There's a customer experience there, and it's really not that bad," he said.

"They value engineer and design the experience in such a way that it doesn't really have many problems."

### Shock to the system

If nurseries and garden centers had been reluctant to hop fully online, the shock of COVID-19 might have been just the jolt they needed to finally make the leap.

With so many people sequestered in their homes and reluctant to go out during the pandemic, offering an online shopping option might be the only way customers will connect and buy from nurseries

"This is forever going to change the horticulture industry, because the clients are going to change how they buy things," McCabe said. "Right now, the holdouts are going to be forced to buy online, so the bare minimum is, it will become another option for people to get plant material."

Fortunately, new options, technologies and programs have arisen that can help get nurseries online in a hurry and help them stay afloat through the current crisis. >>



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Hansen's platform, Plant Lust, is free for nurseries who want to list inventory and information. Customers can search the site for specific plants — it currently lists between 40,000 and 50,000 plants from close to 120 nurseries — and see where they can locate them. There's also a sales platform for nurseries who want to sell plants.

McCabe's firm recently worked with Oregon grower **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery** to launch Garden Center 911, an online referral program to help garden centers recover lost revenue due to the spring slowdown. Garden centers get a referral link that goes to the Little Prince of Oregon Nursery online store; they can share that link through social media channels and get 20% of the purchase price of each referred sale.

The tech firm SBI Software, which specializes in supply chain management software for the green industry, has kicked off a national website called **noncontactplant-pickup.com**. Through it, customers can find plant retailers, order and pay online and pick up their order at the center without ever having to come into contact with someone in-person. On top of that, the site pledges a half-percent of each sale to the World Health Organization's COVID-19 Response Fund.

"I think with everything that's happened, I'm feeling pretty fortunate that the green industry has remained strong and that, in this time of uncertainty, people are staying home and thinking about what they want to matter," Markus said. "They're thinking about their landscapes, you know? They're excited about the prospect of planting a new tree, more so now than any time I've been in the business. The only thing that's certain right now is that everything in the world has changed over the last few months, and that's bringing a whole new dynamic to everything." ©

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