

Retailers are our indicator of economic health

In the vast and varied economic ecosystem of professional horticulture, retail nurseries and garden centers often operate as the beating heart — quietly, consistently, and too often underappreciated.

These businesses occupy a unique position where agriculture, retail, education, and community enrichment intersect.

Yet despite their importance, they face mounting challenges that threaten not only their survival but also the health of the broader green industry.

One of the greatest pressures on our retailers is the increasingly volatile supply chain for plant material. Unlike manufactured goods, plants are a living product. Weather patterns, water access, pest pressures, and labor shortages all play unpredictable roles in determining plant availability.

Garden centers bear the brunt of these fluctuations. If growers struggle, the retailers struggle; if shipping delays occur, living inventory suffers. The result is a delicate balancing act where businesses must predict customer demand months in advance while navigating variables far beyond their control.

The green industry's backbone

We have high quality independent garden centers in Oregon. Some grow their own nursery stock to better vertically integrate their supply chain on plants.

The OAN does not court the big-box stores to be part of our membership. This should not dismiss their importance — after all, we need to be where the people are. Many of the Northwest big-box stores source their material from Oregon growers, and this is good. However, locally owned garden centers understand the long-term value of knowledgeable guidance, regionally appropriate plants, and proper aftercare. Nursery retailers specialize in these services, which ultimately

determine gardening success.

From propagation and companies who “like the sea — provide the plankton to the nursery sector,” to growers of all sizes and types, to the landscape and garden center community and those suppliers who help with managing all manners of growing challenges, they all matter. We need all parts to fire on all cylinders to achieve economic success.

Oregon retailers occupy the cutting edge of service, quality and innovation. The ability to adapt during the COVID bubble to be “touch free” was driven by AI’s Garden & Home. They then shared their process and success with retailers throughout the United States. A rising tide lifts all boats.

Connection is the path to success.

Retail garden centers remain essential to the economic and ecological fabric of their communities. They serve as local knowledge hubs, empowering gardeners, homeowners, and landscapers with the expertise needed to create thriving, sustainable outdoor spaces.

They support regional growers, preserving plant diversity and encouraging responsible ecological practices. They champion the right plant in the right place. They serve as a source for native plants — and a resource on pollinator health and environmentally sound gardening — in ways large retailers simply cannot replicate.

Perhaps most importantly, garden centers cultivate something immeasurable but deeply necessary: a sense of connection.

In an increasingly digital world, these spaces offer hands-on experiences, community workshops, and moments of sensory grounding. They invite people to touch, smell, and learn — a form of engagement that nurtures not only landscapes but the soul.

Supporting nursery retail garden centers is not merely a matter of sentimentality; it is an investment in a resilient local economy, a healthier environment, and a vibrant horticultural future. If we overlook the challenges they face, we risk losing far more than small businesses—we risk weakening the roots of an entire industry.



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

At OAN, we promote our retail garden centers through Plant Something Oregon. The interstate Plant Something effort was the brainchild of Arizona Nursery Association Executive Director Cheryl Goar Koury, who challenged us to promote our garden centers with a promotional approach closer to the “Got Milk?” campaign by the dairy industry.

The Plant Something Oregon effort educates gardeners and extolls the positives of plants and trees. Our promotional channels include a folding nursery road map, e-newsletter and blog (all accessible at PlantSomethingOregon.com).

Reality and challenges

The industry recognizes that what is produced is a luxury item. We may have a slice of the food game, but it is not what the tremendous volume of plants and trees provide as climate positive solutions to homes and cities.

A lot of what is grown goes towards re-wholesalers and landscapers, who live and die on the strength of the housing market. We learned this lesson firsthand almost two decades ago.

What I am seeing from national publications is that more housing builders are in a wait-and-see pattern. With plants and high-ticket items (especially patio furniture) leading the decreased sales, the categories that had strong sales were home décor/gift/fashion and containers (pottery).

Home décor/gift/fashion are having a record year, and containers are compared to 2024. The cautionary tale from retailers is housing plus economic uncertainty equals depressing sales.