

# SPRING AHEAD

## BUT DON'T FALL BEHIND

See how your peers fared this spring 2005.

By Catherine Evans

**S**pring is over, time to relax, go on vacation and not have to think about plants for another year. You better not be thinking that way; just because spring is over does not mean that you shouldn't be working your fingers to the bones to analyze this past spring and think about what you can do better for 2006. I know I sound a little harsh, but business is business, and you want to be the best you can be, right?

I spoke to five garden centers from various parts of the country to see how their 2005 springs went. The weather is always a bone of contention in this industry, so I am not even going to mention that until later. Some new things that seemed to bud were the fountain craze

coming back and, of course, the container gardening rage that just seems to be growing more and more every year. Though I was unable to interview everyone who owns a garden center in this country, the people I did talk to can give you some ideas of what was going on at certain businesses in certain areas of the country. You'll need to determine for yourselves how your friends or competitors did this past season and what you can learn from some of their information to help your garden center in the future.

### OVERALL, HOW WAS YOUR 2005 SPRING SEASON?

"This has been another tough spring for the Detroit area. The economy is still sluggish, and the weather was awful — snow in

April, rain in mid-May and +90° F in June. We did have some increases mainly in the color items such as bedding plants, perennials and pottery. But our sales have been flat or down a couple points." *Tim Parker, general manager of Plymouth Nursery & Garden Center, Plymouth, Mich.*

"Spring 2005 was much better than 2004. The weather was a bit odd (nothing new), but customers were very anxious. They were buying in mid-March and continued through June. Sales were up about 10 percent over last year, and the summer seems to be going well." *Lisa Campbell, owner of Danville Gardens, Inc., Danville, Ill.*

"Spring 2005 was very cool and wet; however, sales were surprisingly only slightly behind 2004, which was a banner year. June was the best June ever, in part due to the wet spring and the lackluster performance of annuals and veggies planted out early. The late start to the season also affected the timing and availability of some warm weather material, pushing the sales forward to June." *Christina Feile, vice president of Atlantic Nursery & Garden Center, Inc., Freeport, N.Y.*

"Overall, it was good. We got lucky with the weather. April started off warm and then got chilly. Though May started off cold, it did not get too wet. And then it stayed cool and didn't get too hot all the way through May. So we had a longer season on the annual side that helped retail quite a bit." *Dan Mulhall, vice president of Mulhall's Nursery, Omaha, Neb.*

### HOW DID THE WEATHER AFFECT SALES?

"The weather is the single most factor, as most of your readers know. Recently we had temperatures in the low 80s, and we were busy. But then it hit the low 90s, and we were slow...it's not rocket science." *Tim Parker, general manager of Plymouth Nursery & Garden Center, Plymouth, Mich.* ♦



This year Smith & Hawken has been adding its "store within a store" concept to many garden centers who in turn are saying it really did well this past spring.



Even though people have been saying fountain sales have been declining in the past few years, this spring seemed to show a slight turnaround.

“We had good weather early, and then it got cold. Five nights of frost the first week of May made it difficult to plant. Some customers ignored our warnings and replanted later. We can’t feel guilty when we’ve warned them, and we won’t turn away duplicate sales.” *Lisa Campbell, owner of Danville Gardens, Inc., Danville, Ill.*

“It wasn’t so much the plant material looking good. Of course, that’s a problem with rain, but when it rains every weekend — and in California people get spoiled by weather — into the second week of May, you’ve got a problem. The problem wasn’t lack of product; it was weather that kept people away.” *Leo Gorla, president of operations for the California Division of Summer Winds Garden Centers, Inc., Campbell, Calif.*

#### **WHAT WERE SOME OF THE TRENDS OR BEST SELLERS YOU NOTICED THIS YEAR IN HARD GOODS AND LIVE GOODS?**

“Our best sellers were premium glazed pottery, larger sized annuals (4- to 6-inch), porch pots, Endless Summer and Big Daddy hydrangeas, wicker furniture, landscape decorative stone and premium potting soil — Proven Winners (large

size bags).” *Tim Parker, general manager of Plymouth Nursery & Garden Center, Plymouth, Mich.*

“Our best sellers continue to be Proven Winners (PW) and perennials. We utilize PW marketing and make lots of containers that are cash and carry. We also do a lot of special orders, which use many PW plants and perennials in a variety of our customers’ containers. Pond plants continue to increase each year. Container gardening continues to increase, and we sold lots of ceramic pots. The other items that seem to be good sellers are still fountains, Music of the Spheres wind chimes and garden accents (natural looking styles).” *Lisa Campbell, owner of Danville Gardens, Inc., Danville, Ill.*

“Any plants in color are always top sellers. We saw a sales increase in potted annuals. Tropical-colored wall metal art sold well as a garden accent as did Mexican Talavera pottery and container gardens.” *Christina Feile, vice president of Atlantic Nursery & Garden Center, Inc., Freeport, N.Y.*

“In four of our stores, we did the Smith & Hawkins ‘store within a store’ concept, and they were good. We brought in a line of our own ♦

patio furniture, which we haven't done in the past, direct import and did very well with that. Fountains continue to grow for us. When it came to live goods, some of the new plant introductions from Monrovia, especially the new mandevilla. I would say that the downsizing of perennials continues to grow. As the 4-inch



Wind chimes and ceramic pottery were also a hit in 2005.

perennial line continues to expand and get wider and wider, we're selling more of it. The bad news is it takes away from some of the previous gallon-can sales we used to get. In a spotty year with vegetables, because of the weather, organic vegetables had a nice increase. The other thing we've had good success with is taking the imported pottery and making up arrangements. That is something we haven't done in the past that we've had very good success with this year." *Leo Gorla, president of operations for the California Division of Summer Winds Garden Centers, Inc., Campbell, Calif.*

"Things that did well for us in the spring were our outdoor living areas (casual furniture, statuary, pottery). Annuals were up, which was great. Perennials were up. Tree and shrub was flat or down a little bit. And we're not quite sure why there was a disconnect between perennials and trees and shrubs; it wasn't bad, but it just wasn't up like the other areas were. Garden shop (chemical area) was flat. And flat was good because we had been losing some ground to the big boxes up the street. We seemed to have reversed or stopped that cycle, and we're starting to battle back. Our customer count was up a little bit this year. Our average sale was up just a hair as well." *Dan Mulhall, vice president of Mulhall's Nursery, Omaha, Neb.*

**WHAT BRANDS DID YOU USE, AND HOW WELL DID THEY DO?**

"We used Proven Winners, including the POP kit; it had very good success. Overall, the 4-inch material has been very strong, and the commodity

items like flats have dropped off. We tried the Miracle-Gro Nursery Select line, it sold OK, but we were disappointed that some of the plants seemed small, and we didn't get some of the special varieties that were promised. We may not carry Nursery Select next year." *Tim Parker, general manager of Plymouth Nursery & Garden Center, Plymouth, Mich.*

"PW is the brand we sell the most, almost exclusively. Their marketing beats anything we could do and helps to sell much more product if used correctly. We will always be 'our own brand' because of where we are located. We are a destination, and there are no other businesses close to us. So when people are coming here, they are coming to Danville Gardens, and they aren't thinking of any other garden centers." *Lisa Campbell, owner of Danville Gardens, Inc., Danville, Ill.*

"We use Proven Winners and Garden Splendor, but mostly we just purchase quality material regardless of the brand. If Atlantic Nursery sells it, the customer is assured of the level of quality. We believe that a brand is not a specific product you sell but a way of doing business." *Christina Feile, vice president of Atlantic Nursery & Garden Center, Inc., Freeport, N.Y.*

"We go with vendors who grow a very good product. We don't really triangle out of our way to find anyone's particular variety. It's whatever they grow, and if they grow good [product], we buy lots of it. We've experimented with different things, and I don't think people are really in tune to the name Flower Fields, the name P. Allen Smith, the ◆

name Proven Winners, the name of anything. They shop with their eyes. If they see something new and unusual, and it looks beautiful, they don't pick up the pot to see if it's got a [brand name on it]." *Leo Gorla, president of operations for the California Division of Summer Winds Garden Centers, Inc., Campbell, Calif.*

"We sell Monrovia product, Endless Summer and Proven Winners, but we don't market them as Proven Winners or any [other name]. The Proven Winners are with the other things on the annual tables. They're not in their own area. They sell because the plants look good,



Atlantic Nursery & Garden Shop, Freeport, N.Y., said that if it was in color it was a great seller.

not because of the pot they're in or the tag they have." *Dan Mulhall, vice president of Mulhall's Nursery, Omaha, Neb.*

**WHAT KINDS OF MARKETING PROGRAMS OR PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES DID YOU USE; WERE THEY SUCCESSFUL?**

"Direct mail pieces with coupons did well, but direct mail on a Smith & Hawken postcard didn't do as well (we sold the smaller items well but not the larger, more expensive teak furniture). Our Spring Open House with garden writer Janet Maconovich brought in more than 100 customers. We also advertised in newspaper, radio and cable, but it is difficult to measure due to lack of feedback." *Tim Parker, general manager of Plymouth Nursery & Garden Center, Plymouth, Mich.*

"We have the usual open house and seminars, but the most fun thing we do is Play Days. Customers bring in their containers/baskets and plant in the greenhouse. We are available to help, but they do the work. We do this after Mother's Day so we're not swamped and make sure to have lots of examples for them to copy. Their containers are much nicer with mannequins to use, and we certainly sell more product than we would if they were planting at home. We also held a mid-March luncheon. This was a catered luncheon with a container demo and fashion show. There were 260 women, and we had to turn away over 50 because of space/catering restrictions. We sold a lot of product when we normally wouldn't, and it got them very excited about what was coming later. Next spring

we're planning on two luncheons!" *Lisa Campbell, owner of Danville Gardens, Inc., Danville, Ill.*

"We did a preseason newsletter coupon for 30 percent off any one item the first weekend in April and an early impatiens flat sale the last weekend in April. Atlantic Dollars are earned by getting \$1 for every \$10 spent from April 1 to mid-June, redeemed the week before our 4th-of-July sale. We offered a two-year guarantee with trees and shrubs that are purchased with Bumper Crop and Roots transplant 1 Step (at the recommended rate and on the same receipt)." *Christina Feile, vice president of Atlantic Nursery & Garden Center, Inc., Freeport, N.Y.*

"When it comes to marketing, we're still a little bit meat and potatoes. Most of our marketing programs are newspaper ads. We do full-color, two-sided ads in the paper. We took all of our ads to a two-sided insert. We ran one ad this year in April that was strictly either new items for us, such as Smith & Hawken or our own line of furniture, or new plant introductions, especially the ones from Monrovia and Hines. That ad had basically no price, it just said, this is what we have new and exciting. It seemed to work pretty good this last year, and we're probably going to expand on it more next year." *Leo Gorla, president of operations for the California Division of Summer Winds Garden Centers, Inc., Campbell, Calif.*

"We did some television, which we thought was effective. We have begun using a members program, which we are not reaping the benefits ◆

of yet. But we are collecting data and information on our customers, which we hope will help us later in the year and in future years. Mostly we've done some television, radio and newspaper. We're going to use our members program data to allow us to target our marketing better in the future." *Dan Mulhall, vice president of Mulhall's Nursery, Omaha, Neb.*

**BASED ON THE 2005 SPRING SEASON, WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING ON DOING DIFFERENTLY FOR THE 2006 SPRING SEASON?**

"We intend to be extremely cautious with the amount of inventory we stock. With the rain in May and the heat in June we became backed up

with inventory, including perishable tree and shrub stock. We feel that re-order product is out there, and we will work with our buyers to do more 'just in time' ordering. This will allow us to maintain more positive cash flow; have less inventory, maintenance and dump; and present more of a fresh look for June and July sales." *Tim Parker, general manager of Plymouth Nursery & Garden Center, Plymouth, Mich.*

"Re-evaluating the numbers and trying to get the right amount of product ready at the right time. I'm sure this is a futile attempt, as the weather will never cooperate, but nonetheless, we will try. We're already planning some new seminars and contests too." *Lisa Campbell, owner of Danville Gardens, Inc., Danville, Ill.*

"We want the departments to feature different key products more often (not necessarily on sale) to keep the store feeling fresh and new on a regular basis. We are always looking for ways to present our products in a way that differentiates us from our competitors, especially the mass merchants. We want to stay focused on quality products and good service." *Christina Feile, vice president of Atlantic Nursery & Garden Center, Inc., Freeport, N.Y.*

"Have good weather. Plans for next year...we're just beginning to formulate them now; we're going to do what we've always done, but we're going to take it a step higher. We're going to get complete employee and management involvement into making the plans for next year. Instead of so much top pushing down, but always asking opinions, it's going to be a lot more, 'what do you need us to do for you.' The main thing is to get a little bit more involvement on maybe what we do carry, how we carry it, how we distribute it, so forth and so on. We're going to have a big meeting in August and another one in November to finalize it." *Leo Gorla, president of operations for the California Division of Summer Winds Garden Centers, Inc., Campbell, Calif.*

"The marketing is going to be more targeted, because we are collecting names [for the rewards program]. And we are going to continue to try to keep our prices down in order to compete with Home Depot and Lowe's. We think the price does matter. We're going to continue and better develop our lifestyle marketing, our lifestyle merchandising, so people can see how the product is used or could be used in their home. We think that's very effective. That's our main focus." *Dan Mulhall, vice president of Mulhall's Nursery, Omaha, Neb.*

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