

# The 2002 Christmas Highs and Drastic Lows

Economists have reported the 2002 Christmas selling season to be the lowest in more than 30 years. That may not be the case for lawn and garden retailers; not only did they hold their own against the competition, but most had sales that were up a few percentage points.

**By Catherine Evans**

**I**t was reported that 2001 was the slowest shopping season in more than a decade, but then 2002 came and a whole new low came for retailers. For some reason, however, the negative numbers did not seem to bother lawn and garden retailers. Despite the terrible Christmas selling season, the majority of garden centers in the United States had an even or increased profit margin compared to the year before. *Lawn & Garden Retailer* took a few minutes to talk to some garden centers and found out that the Christmas selling season was not such a disappointing year, after all, and that there was also a feeling of tradition among consumers' purchasing decisions. People did not want any other colors than red for poinsettias, they wanted large Christmas trees and most of all, they wanted lots of Christmas decorations in their homes. Here is the proof from their mouths to our magazine.

## WHAT WERE THE MOST POPULAR/ BEST-SELLING HARD GOODS?

"I would have to say wind chimes were the most popular-selling hard good, because in our market area, we are the only shop in town that carries a well-tuned aluminum wind chime." *Terry Light, Berry's Garden Center, Danville, Ill.*

"Christmas seemed a little off this year because of the shorter time period, but we sold gift certificates and various gift items such as sculptural-type things and clocks and thermometers. We also sold a lot of hand-blown, glass hummingbird feeders and wind chimes." *Gayle Davenport, Rillito Nursery and Garden Center, Tucson, Ariz.*

"For us it would have to be Christmas tree stands. We sell so many Christmas trees, and probably 75 percent of our trees we build or put a stand on them before they go out. It's a wood stand that has a bucket and braces that we actually build. We also sell the heavy-duty plastic ones that Cinco makes, but most of the pre-made stands we sell, we make ourselves. We also sell Christmas tree preservatives with almost every tree, and a tree disposal bag that goes out with every other tree. After that we sell tons of greenery." *Bob Wilson, Nicholson-Hardie, Dallas, Texas*

"We had Department 56 ornaments that were so popular people from 100 miles away were coming to buy them. They are ornaments that look like they are from Cirque du Soleil, and for some reason, we were the only shop in Indianapolis to get them this year. It was definitely a good, hot item for us this year." *Tom McNamara, McNamara's Garden Center, Indianapolis, Ind.*



## WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR SALES WAS FROM HARD LINES VS. LIVE GOODS?

"Our sales were 75 percent hard goods because it is just too cold to plant. We are a plant nursery, and this just isn't the time of year for live plant sales — that is why we have the Christmas shop to carry us through." *Sabrina Owens, Easy Living Garden Center, Perry, Ga.*

"We were about 80 percent hard goods and 20 percent live goods, because this garden center is very diverse and has a lot of hard goods in it. In other words, we have a power equipment department that most garden centers don't have, which is what skews the live goods a little." *Walter Morrison, Morrison's Home and Garden Center, Plymouth, Mass.*

"We had about 50/50. This year our live season was higher because people bought more Christmas trees, and more people came to us ►

because other places ran out of trees so early.” *Steve Zischke, Lakeland Yard and Garden, Jackson, Miss.*

“We sold about 67 percent hard goods. We always do, but there was an increase in live goods this year. Cut trees went really well this year, they were up by 20 percent.” *Sig Feile, Atlantic Garden Center, Long Island, N.Y.*

“About 60 percent was for live goods because we have such nice poinsettias. The secret on our Christmas trees is that we buy about 8-9 different kinds of trees, and three of them we sell for the same price no matter the size, whether four feet or eight feet, they were all the same, and that made people want to buy them.” *Tom McNamara, McNamara’s Garden Center, Indianapolis, Ind.*

#### WHICH POINSETTIA VARIETIES DID YOU CARRY? WHICH WERE MOST IN DEMAND?

“‘Prestige’ was our number-one brand, and then we had ‘Jester’, ‘Jingle Bells’, ‘Monet’ and all of the odd colors, but Prestige red was our bestseller. We have always tried ‘Freedom’ in the past, and this is the first year that we tried some different varieties. Prestige turned out the best.” *Jim Goode, Goode Greenhouses, Fort Dodge, Iowa*

“Red will usually carry 80 percent of the sales; I think red is the color that everyone associates with bringing that traditional Christmas feeling into the house.

That is what everyone is looking for: large, red poinsettias. Some people choose other colors to coordinate with what they decorate with in the house, but for the most part it is red.” *Bob Wilson, Nicholson-Hardie, Dallas, Texas*

“This year, predominantly red and red. We had some white, pink, marble and burgundy, but the majority of what sold was red. People wanted a change from last year, which was mostly a mix of colors, but it was definitely red this year.” *Carol McAllister, Yard N’ Garden, Fenton, Mich.*

“We carried Paul Ecke hybrid varieties, and as far as the specifics, we carried about 15 individual varieties. This was pretty much a traditional year, basically reds and whites. ‘Plum Pudding’ slowed down, it was the hot one last year, and pretty much all of the retailers had that variety this year as opposed to last year. There was a new introduction from Ecke called ‘Dulce Maria’, a novelty variety that attracted some interest, and although it didn’t make high numbers, it certainly took people’s curiosity.” *Ron Vanderhoff, Roger’s Gardens, Corona del Mar, Calif.*

“I suppose reds are still the poinsettia color that is most in demand. We carried Plum Pudding, ‘Peterstar White’ and Pink, ‘Monet Twilight’, Jingle Bells, ‘Freedom Salmon’, ‘Da Vinci’, ‘Cranberry Punch’ and ‘Carousel’. Carousel and Cranberry Punch were the two most-popular colors after the red. *Terry Light, Berry’s Garden Center, Danville, Ill.*

“We carried a number of varieties including Prestige, ‘Winter Rose’, Plum Pudding, Monet, ‘Cortez Burgundy’, ‘White Star’, ‘O’Ryan’, ‘Silver Star’, Jingle Bells and ‘Marble Star’.” *Sig Feile, Atlantic Garden Center, Long Island, N.Y.*

#### WHAT KINDS OF PROMOTIONAL OR MARKETING STRATEGIES DID YOU USE THIS SEASON? WERE THEY SUCCESSFUL? WHY?

“We had a new twist this year by adding craft fairs. We basically allowed a craft fair to use our greenhouse at each store (two locations) during our





open house to try and draw in more traffic. We found that it was successful and it wasn't. It was successful at drawing traffic; we had a lot more traffic coming into the store this season. It wasn't successful at increasing our sales because we felt like people only had so much money in their pockets and they spent it at the craft fair, causing us to not increase our sales. Next year we will do it again, but we'll have the craft fair a week before the open house as a preview." **John Crook, Town and Country Gardens Inc., Idaho Falls, Idaho**



"We had a poinsettia open house the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and we sold 15 percent of them that day. There was also live music every weekend including a harpist, string quartet and a folk singer. We will probably add more next year because it causes people to stay longer and listen to the music. We advertised in the newspaper and on talk radio also — that was pretty successful because we brought the advertising people in from the media and basically let them be our

consultants on how to run a good ad." **Tom McNamara, McNamara's Garden Center, Indianapolis, Ind.**

"I do a flyer that is inserted into the newspaper; it is fairly successful and is one of seven flyers that I do every year. People wait for our flyers, and they look forward to them because we advertise items that people might not be used to seeing, so that brings them in." **Walter Morrison, Morrison's Home and Garden Center, Plymouth, Mass.**

"We had an open house with Santa Claus and real reindeer. We also had a before-Christmas sale that was very successful, bringing 26 percent more in sales from last year." **Jim Harpold, Harpold's Garden Center, Berrien Springs, Mich.**

"We gave out a coupon worth a 20-percent discount on a single purchase earlier in the season to get them to come back, and we had a good return on them. We did a little bit of television advertising on our trees, ornaments and gift shop that was pretty successful. We did that last year and felt like we got a good response, so we did it again this year." **Steve Zischke, Lakeland Yard and Garden, Jackson, Miss.**

"We always do a big kick-off party, kind of a Christmas grand opening that we have been doing for a couple of decades now. It is in the second week of October to kick off the Christmas season. We also use a lot of the local media to run editorials and human-interest stories that bring some press. It is very successful and brings a lot of people in. We also do a lot of activities during the season like demonstrations on how to make centerpieces, how to decorate a tree and so on — basically seminars that relate to almost any Christmas topic. People come to these seminars, learn how to do the activity, buy all of the components from the store and go home to make the items themselves. We also have Santa Claus for the children, which is a big tradition, and carolers at various times from various groups. We are also open for longer hours during the season." **Ron Vanderhoff, Roger's Gardens, Corona del Mar, Calif. ♦**

**BASED ON YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHAT KINDS OF CHANGES WILL YOU MAKE FOR THE 2003 CHRISTMAS SEASON?**

"We stopped selling cut Christmas trees three or four years ago so we could focus on selling live trees. We had cut our number this year, and we were still left with quite a few. They just did not sell this year; we might have to cut a lot of our live goods, but that all depends on the economy." **Gayle Davenport, Rillito Nursery and Garden Center, Tucson, Ariz.**

"We will probably carry more large, cut trees. I received a lot of feedback as one of the few people that had a good selection in small trees. It seems that other retailers just want to have 6- to 7- and 7- to 8-foot and not much else. Our selection is tabletop, 4-5, 5-6, 6-7 and so on, but I will probably carry more large trees next year. Many of our customers have newer homes with taller ceilings and people are tending to purchase taller trees." **Bob Wilson, Nicholson-Hardie, Dallas, Texas**

"Somehow or another we got a double order of stuffed animals that did not do well; we still have 90 percent of those, so we won't be doing them again next year. North Star was a new company for us this year, and their products did really well so we will do more with them next year. They carry a number of ornaments with a good price range, cheaper than most of what we have carried. The mens' ornaments that they carry did really well, so we will probably get a larger variety of those. We sold all of our garland and wreaths, so we will probably be getting more florals as well." **Sabrina Owens, Easy Living Garden Center, Perry, Ga.**

"One of the things we are going to do is cut our order because cut trees were down for us this year. Promotion-wise we will do a little of what we were doing this year with television radio and newspaper. We are going to do a little less newspaper and more television and radio." **John Crook, Town and Country Garden's Inc., Idaho Falls, Idaho**

"We will try to do more of the decorated wreaths, hanging baskets and cemetery baskets.

Hanging gardens were new for us this year and did really well, so we want to focus more on them. We also want to have more material available closer to Thanksgiving so we are not under the gun. Because of the shorter season and weather we had it was harder to get the material ready."

**Walter Morrison, Morrison's Home and Garden Center, Plymouth, Mass.**

"We will probably buy some larger cut trees and make some adjustments there. It seems like more people are wanting larger trees, and we were finding ourselves a little short on those. Other than that, we will stay on the same course and just try to pick up some more items, but we are pretty much going to keep doing what we are doing because it has been pretty successful." **Steve Zischke, Lakeland Yard and Garden, Jackson, Miss.**

"We will continue with the categories that really did well this year: greens and English gardens. We

are going to expand the greens program a lot more and probably give it more space at the store and a larger selection. We will continue to grow the English garden category and give it a larger presentation for both of the categories. We will also have a little more for the Christmas opening." **Ron Vanderhoff, Roger's Gardens, Corona del Mar, Calif.**

**Catherine Evans is associate editor for Lawn & Garden Retailer.**

