

Back *in the Game*

Dispositions were sunny, and engines were running at full throttle. But did the sun really shine, and had the economy picked up any steam? We asked our readers about their spring season.

By Paige Worthy

Expectations and conjectures about what was headed our way this spring were all over the map. Going into 2009, we all wanted to be optimistic that signs of an economic turnaround would begin showing at garden centers as winter turned to spring, but even as the calendar pages flipped — consumer spending was promising, and retail outlooks improved by the month — realism crept in as everyone admitted that, despite any sunny economic predictions, this industry is still subject to the stormy whims of meteorology.

So we planned for the best and hunkered down for the worst. And after Mother's Day had come and gone, *Lawn & Garden Retailer* took the industry's spring temperature for a first look at the spring. We asked subscribers to our twice-monthly e-newsletter, the *Retail Report*, how they'd fared that weekend. And to our delight, the response was largely positive.

"Mother's Day weekend was an absolute crazy house," wrote Michelle Grigsby of Village Gardens in Billings, Mont. "A majority of the customers were smiling. The ones that weren't smiling ... couldn't get through the greenhouses to shop."

Teri Smith of Smith's Acres in Niantic, Conn.; Jere Stauffer at Stauffers of Kissel Hill in Pennsylvania; and Judy Selchert of Steve's Ace Home & Garden in Dubuque, Iowa, all reported record-breaking sales during the Mother's Day holiday.

And when the report wasn't so positive, it was

all about the weather: From upstate New York to Edmond, Okla., rain put a damper on sales, but the customers who braved the weather still left with purchases.

After such a strong start, our interest was sufficiently piqued, and we wanted a post-Memorial Day update. So we came back and asked readers whether the season had followed suit from Mother's Day. Nearly 300 readers responded to our survey, and we'd like to share the results with you.

Down to Brass Tacks

The most obvious question: So, how's it going? The positive attitude we saw after Mothers' Day pervaded the results of our spring survey, but hard numbers ruled on this question. Still, almost 65 percent of respondents reported no change or an increase in this year's sales (as of June 1) compared to 2008. Of the remaining respondents, only 13 percent said their sales had taken a significant hit compared to last year. The weather-versus-economy debate was split right down the middle: Fifty percent said the weather had the biggest impact on sales — a respondent in Oregon said it had rained for 22 days straight in May, yikes! — and 48 percent said it was the economy. "Great weather made for a good spring — our customers didn't seem fazed by the economy at all," said one respondent, who wasn't affected by either, it seems. "We were glad that we made the risky decision to increase our inventory this year rather than cut back." The remainder cited a variety of other factors, including labor costs.

For some, the Mother's Day record breaking continued throughout the spring: "May was the best month for sales in our 27 years in business," said one respondent. That's not something every garden center can claim, even in a stable year, but it's certainly something to shoot for!

Best Sellers

Getting a bit more specific, we asked about your most successful product categories. The choices: annuals, perennials, trees and shrubs, mixed containers, edibles, outdoor-living products, water-gardening products or gift-shop items. As expected, live goods were ultimately the king, with only about 14 percent of respondents reporting hard goods as their best sellers.

And though annuals still topped the list of live goods — with nearly 34 percent of respondents naming it the top category — vegetables, herbs and other edibles were close at their heels at about 30 percent. More than three-quarters of respondents said their sales of edibles had increased from last year, too, which is no surprise. As younger generations continued discovering the frugal joys of do-it-yourself gardening and the Obamas embraced their backyard organic vegetable garden, the edibles trend kept growing among consumers.



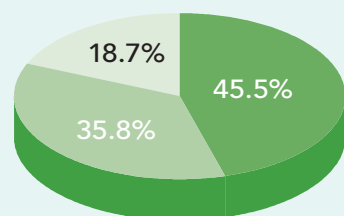
Selling Smarter

And it's not just quality product that had the customers coming in. Many garden centers attributed their spring success to better marketing and advertising. "[Sales] are up about 170 percent," one respondent said. "We attribute this to better advertising, promotions and quality service with a knowledgeable staff."

After Mother's Day weekend, Smith's Acres happily reported that their renewed marketing efforts, including TV and radio spots, as well as coupons in a local direct-mail sale book, were paying dividends. Teri Smith offered these words to those who have cut that budget: "That's sort of foolish. There are all sorts of good deals to be had with advertisers right now." The buyer's market: It's not just for real estate anymore.

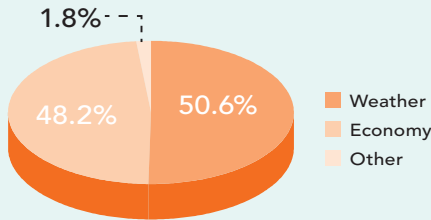
Were your spring sales up or down?

■ Up ■ Down ■ No Change



SPRING REVIEW

Weather vs. Economy
Which had a bigger impact on sales?



Summing it Up

Though the responses to our survey seemed positive overall — even if sales were less than stellar — there were a few caveats. Big-ticket sales seemed to be down across the board, including trees, large shrubs and outdoor furniture. And even if cars have packed the parking lots every weekend this spring, it seems each customer has spent less per transaction. (Stan Pohmer delves more into this new consumer mind-set in his column on page 38.)

Attitudes are positive throughout the results, but it's hard to draw industry-wide conclusions based on this survey. Weather and economic conditions vary from day to day and depend on where you are, above all else. Hard work, great customer service and quality product are industry commonalities, but the road splits from there. One respondent, however, offered a sentiment everyone can share: "I'm so tired."

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