

IT'S FINALLY SPRING



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You polished, planned and prayed all winter long, and now it's finally here — spring. Those glorious eight weeks that can either make or break your budget for the rest of the year. If the economy holds strong and you get enough sunshine during the next two months, the plan for a new greenhouse or “real” benches or a color sign printer will become a reality.

It's true, we all live and die by those two months, whether they fall in March and April or May and June, when consumers make the vast majority of lawn and garden purchases. Yes, Christmas is an important second peak, and many garden centers have even developed a nice fall program. But it's still spring that fills the operating accounts and makes everything else possible.

PROGRESS REPORT

As I write this, in mid-May at the last possible minute before publication, the word from retailers is mostly good. Our editors have been on the road since February, visiting both independents and mass merchants, as well as non-garden retailers, in five states and three countries. What we have seen is a very typical picture. Those with good weather, a clearly defined and targeted customer, and innovative, quality product are having a banner year; those that are missing one or more pieces of this puzzle are struggling.

In the South, spring broke early this year. Spurred by cool nights in January and early February, gardeners were eager to start planting by mid-February or early March, and weekend after weekend of sunshine made that possible. The only negative for this region is the lingering drought, but unlike in years past, it is not getting much press coverage, and gardening seems unaffected.

The California market, which we extend to that general region of the country, is also having a great year. We visited several garden centers and growers during our March Pack Trial trip, see page 10, and all said they posted a record or near-record March. Good weather is less a part of this market, except for early heat, than unique products, so the reported successes can be attributed directly to the garden center.

The Northwest is reporting probably the best spring of any region. I have talked to both

growers and retailers in that region who are “printing money” at this point. They have so far exceed their projections for this year that they are making up for the past three years of bad weather. One grower/retailer even said this is the best spring he's seen in 50 years in the business. That's quite a year.

The one exception to this positive trend seems to be the Midwest, my home market. While we've had some good weekends here and there, lingering cold has slowed the gardening urge. But it's still early, especially in the upper part of the region, so there is time to make it up, and compared to the previous three years, garden centers should post increases.

THE NEXT STEP

I know this is not everyone (anyone from the Northeast want to report in?), but it does give us some good first impressions of spring 2004. We'll have a more complete picture in our annual spring review in the August issue. Until then, it's up to you to decide what to do with this windfall season: pocket some cash, save for the

next rainy season or invest to possibly prevent a bad year.

Bridget E. White

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