



The weather played a major part in the 2006 spring season: Read on to learn what else your peers have to say about this past spring.

By Catherine Evans

Spring 2006 might be in the past, but for many, it was a season they will not long forget. The culprit? Weather. Whether it was good, bad or just so-so, weather was the talk of the trade this year. Retailers had basically every type of weather imaginable this spring — torrential rains, floods, drought and even perfection for some.

How can we be so certain what people had to

say? We asked. For the 2006 spring season review, we sent out a survey to a list of our subscribers to see how they fared during their number-one moneymaking season. We received 156 responses from retailers in all parts of the country and learned a lot about the ups and downs of the season.

Now remember, these results are not statistically significant because they did not come from a truly random sample. The responses

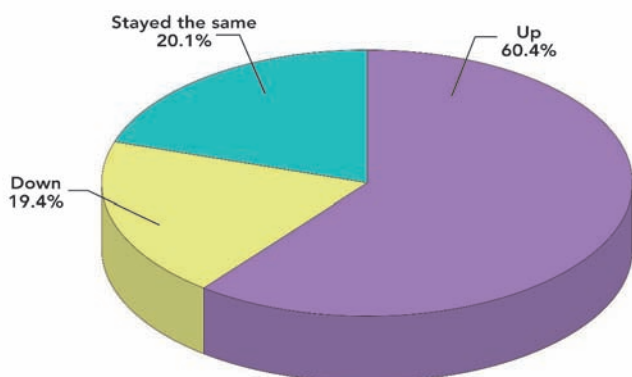
were also anonymous, so no one will have to worry about getting singled out. And although we can't extrapolate results representing the entire industry from this small sample, we can use this information as a good place to start.

I also wanted to give a quick thank you to all of the people who participated in this survey; it was a huge help by allowing us to report the most accurate information to you.

2006 Spring Season Overall

We asked respondents, "Overall, how was your 2006 spring season compared to last year?" Respondents gave an overwhelming response to this question. Even though some of the descriptive feedback was a little negative at times, the 2006 season may not have fared as badly as we all first thought.

Respondent Spring Season Overall



HOW WAS YOUR 2006 SPRING SEASON?

We asked survey participants to describe their spring season in 300 words or less; the following are some of the responses, in no particular order. Remember, these quotes are totally anonymous, so no names or locations will be mentioned.

"Wet, cool, wet, snowy, gray...did I say wet? Spring lasted four days before the temperature soared to summer heat. Our sales were huge for three weeks but could not make up for the three months we lost."

"Sales were up in April, May and June even though city roadwork blocked off two of our four access roads. We were expecting a 15- to 20-percent decrease in sales, but we were pleasantly surprised to see the increases."

"Our spring season went great! We are only in our second year, and our sales from the greenhouse probably quadrupled over last year, and our gift shop did the same."

"The spring season was just about the same as last year dollar wise. We were down about 1,000 customers for May."

"Looking very good! We were up 12 percent in May and 20 percent in June. I think the waves of cool weather have 'reinvented' spring throughout June."

"Worst amount of rain in history until the end of April. May was the busiest in history.

Net result was a 1-percent decrease as of the middle of June."

"Great! It was the perfect year to have just completed a major expansion. I loved having covered shopping space! Hanging baskets flew out of the greenhouse."

"Spring was fantastic. We beat all previous records, but sales came to a screeching stop once we hit the month of June."

"A very dry and mild spring. It was as cool and nice as any [season] I remember in 37 years. Our sales are up double digits."

"Crazy, rainy weather during the early spring. [It was the] worst weather during our move to a new, larger location. But as bad as the weather was, our clients followed us, and we have exceeded plan since April."

"The rain was devastating in the central California foothills, more than six weeks of prime selling time was lost. We were down 60 percent over the previous year. Low and behold, the sun did shine again! We had a record-breaking May and surpassed our year to date from previous year in sales by end of May." ▸



Family



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— Amanda Campbell Briner
 Manager of Outdoor Gardens
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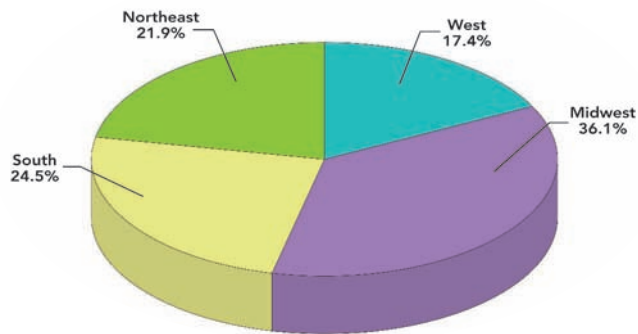
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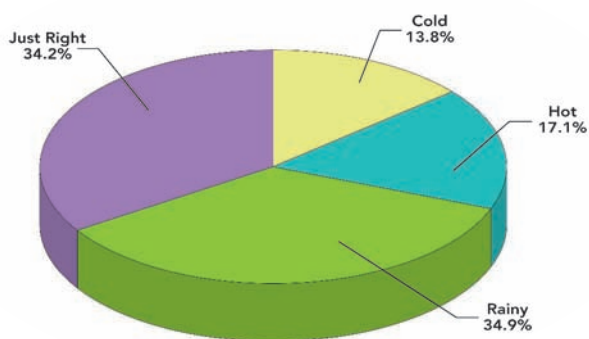
Regional Responses

Region is very important in determining how the spring season went for garden centers, especially this year. The Northeast had rain and floods, the Midwest was almost perfect, the West had some rain and the rest of the country oscillated between extreme cold and heat almost on a daily basis.

Respondent Location By Region



Respondent Weather



Weather Check

With so many people discussing weather this year, we decided to ask garden centers the question, "Overall, how was the weather in your area this season?" There was practically a tie between perfect and rainy, with a .7 percent difference, which seems to be consistent with what everyone is saying.

Best Sellers

Everyone knows that in spring the main seller is typically plants. However, if your customers want a complete garden, there are a number of other products they need.

Obviously, we could not put every product garden centers sell on the list, so we chose some of the most common items. We also added another category so respondents could fill in the blanks with anything we may have missed.

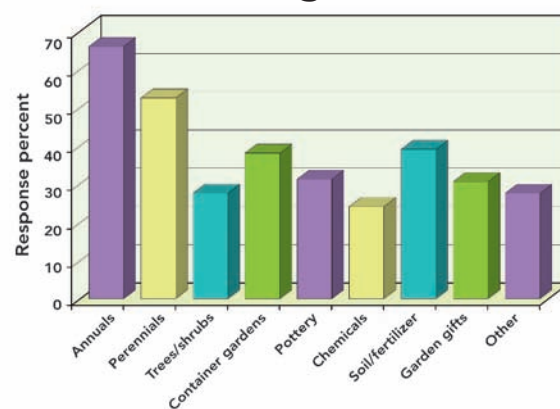
**Respondents were able to give multiple answers.*

OTHER GOOD SELLERS

Other products listed as good sellers include:

- Statuary/fountains
- Hanging baskets
- Birding products

Best-Selling Products



**Out of The Greenhouse.
Into The Green.**



New Trends

Although we have been publishing spring season reviews for several years, it continues to provide helpful information about the industry's hottest trends. This year is no different. What we found out about trends confirms much of what we already knew. Consumers are busy, and they want gardening to be easy. However, they want their yards beautiful and upscale. The following trends were things we knew were coming; it just took a little longer to get the consumers on the bandwagon.

Do it for me. Consumers are increasingly interested in someone else doing their gardening for them. They want someone to come out to their homes and build their gardens, or they at least want someone to plan it for them. This is the whole landscaper/landscape design trend that is obviously becoming hot.

Container gardening. This trend was mentioned in the best-selling category because everyone wants it. From the survey results it also seems like



People want container gardens and they want them ready to go.

consumers want container gardens all done up for them, a la the do-it-for-me trend. Consumers want container gardens in different shapes and sizes for different conditions, and they want it in a pretty pot.

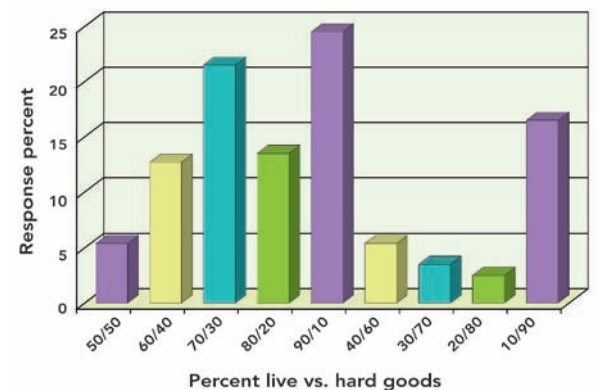
Perennial sales. For the past several years, garden centers have been saying they cannot seem to get rid of perennials; well, this year was completely different. A number of respondents said they couldn't seem to keep perennials on the shelves long enough. People were buying perennials before they were ready, and they were asking for more unique varieties as well.

Glazed pottery. Another trend that respondents raved about was glazed pottery. Consumers were coming in and specifically looking for a beautiful blue pot to go with their Fourth of July mixed container or the perfect red pot to complement their Memorial Day party décor. Customers wanted something to put on their porches to make them pop. Pots that are more upscale and décor related are the major part of the trend.

Stayin' Alive

Not that this category is a big mystery, but it always seems to be of interest to readers. Every time we ask this question, the answers typically show that live goods do a lot better than hard in the spring, but this year seemed to be the extreme. Twenty-four percent of respondents said their sales were 90-percent live goods and 10-percent hard — that is huge. Take a look to see what some of the other percentage differences were. ▶

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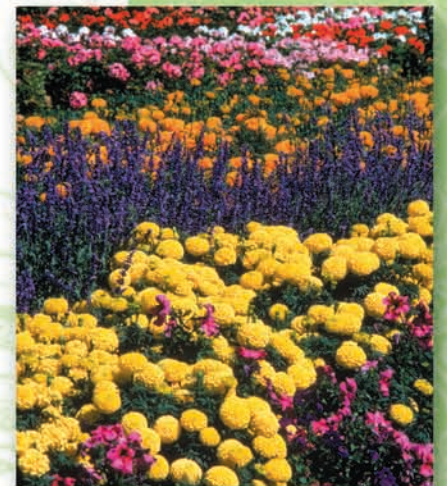
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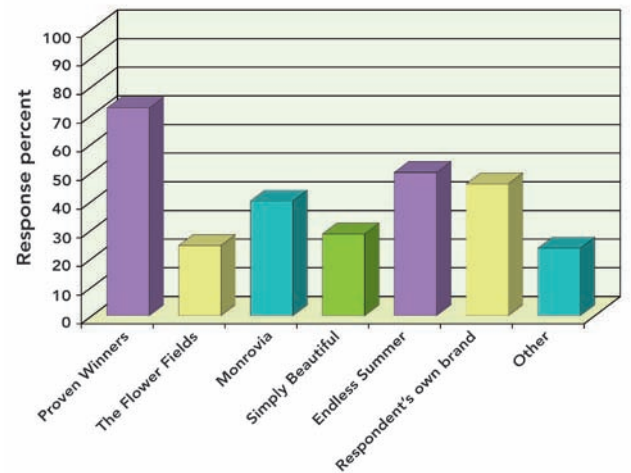
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MANAGEMENT

Brand Recognition

Breeder companies have been working very hard to make sure consumers know what plant brands are available. A lot of garden centers have gotten on the bandwagon and ordered those brands so customers can buy what they have seen in ads.

Brands Sold

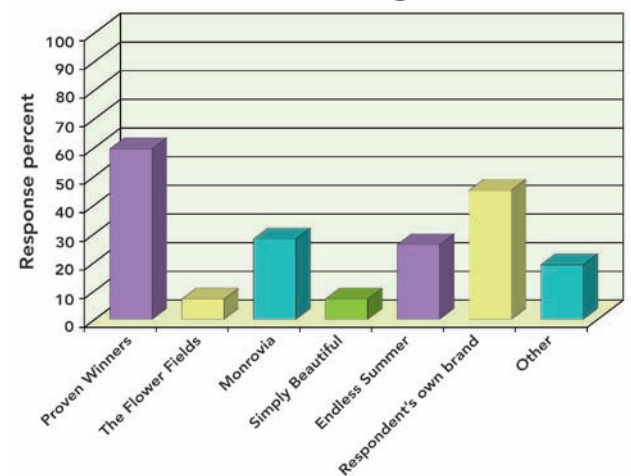


OTHER BRANDS SOLD

Other brands respondents sold in their stores were:

- Grower brands
- Goldfish (Fischer USA)
- Chef Jeff's
- Biltmore Estate
- Viva!
- Novalis (Plants That Work)
- Knock-Out Roses

Best-Selling Brands



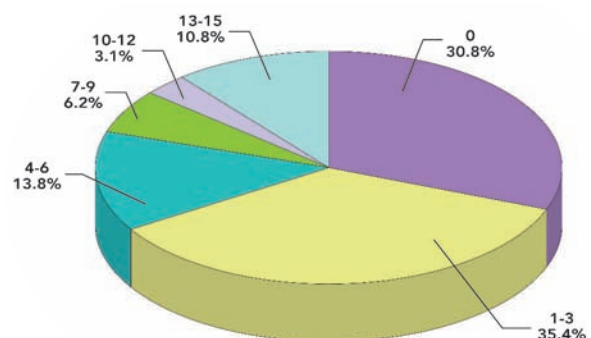
Staffing Up

There is no question you need to add spring-season help every year. The spring season for garden centers is like Christmas for all other retailers: Without extra help, you would not make it. However, when we asked respondents how many employees they add each year, the number was a little bit smaller than expected. ▶



Most respondents said that they only add about 1-3 staff members to their stores for spring.

Number Of Additional Seasonal Staff



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Successful Promotional/Marketing Strategies

Most garden centers cannot stage a successful season without some kind of marketing or promotional strategy. Most respondents said they do the normal promotions of open houses, loyalty programs, E-mail newsletters, newspaper, TV and radio ads, and word of mouth. But all retail outlets need something a little different and unique to bring in more customers. Below are some of the unique ideas respondents listed, and the graph shows how successful the strategies were.

“Senior Citizens Day, 20-percent off days for local large businesses and buy one, get one half price [sales]”

“Talk radio show spots on an outdoor show. Ads in the gardening section of one local paper and in the TV section of another. Word of mouth!”

“‘Thank you’ discount cards after the rush

for teachers, law enforcement, major businesses, hotels, etc.”

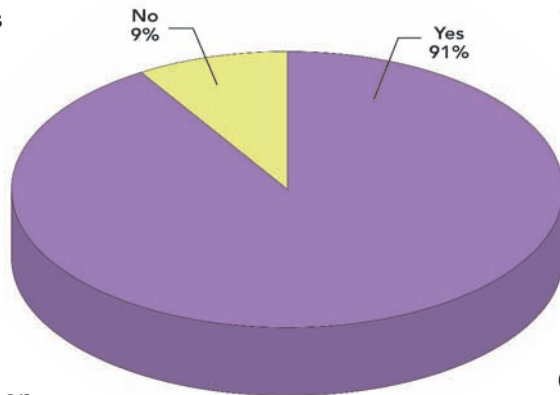
“We worked extensively with our regional tourism groups to bring in coach tours. We offered them free seminars and shopping time.

“We always try to have samples of products we sell on hand for customers. This seems to get them to try something new and come back for more. But more importantly, we work closely with the schools in the area on educating kids on gardening by growing their own veggies, and this gets parents interested also.”

“A virtual tour with local visitors bureau (we’re in a touristy area) and a virtual tour/Web site connection with Chamber of Commerce.

[We also offer] a 20-percent-off coupon in the welcome basket for new businesses presented by the Chamber of Commerce.”

Success Of Promotional/Marketing Strategies



Sending out promotions on specific plants will make consumers think the plants are something new and special, must-have items.

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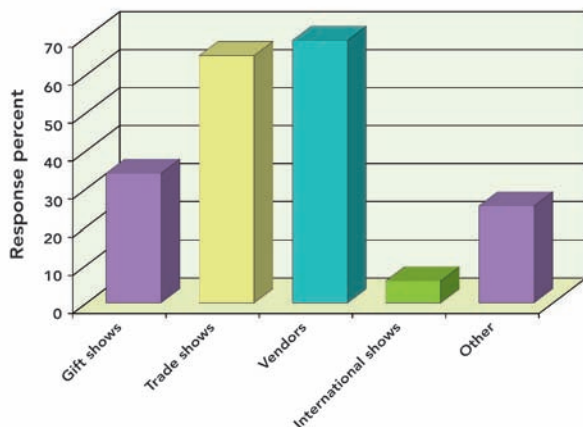
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Spring Buying

The merchandise in your store did not magically fall from the sky, but there are a lot of places it could have come from. The survey asked where respondents do most of their spring buying. As you can see, vendors came in just above trade shows, but check out some of the other places not on the graph.

New Product Sources



OTHER PLACES TO BUY

Other places respondents purchase their merchandise are:

- Magazines (trade and consumer)
- Internet
- Catalogs

Different Next Year

One of the most interesting questions we ask retailers is, “Based on what you did this year, what do you plan on doing differently next year?” We got a variety of answers, but mostly respondents gave honest, good suggestions that others should take a look at. Though the main answer was “Pray for better weather,” there were some suggestions that could help you improve your business.

“Have umbrellas and more planted containers for sale.”

“Be more organized, spend more time developing a marketing plan, make more pre-made containers/hanging baskets and train employees earlier.”

“Streamline special order process, have more display beds, eliminate newsprint ads and implement a preferred customer program.”

“Bring product in earlier. Let customers know what selection will be available.”

“Control inventory and cut down initial spring orders. Order as we go and replenish what is needed.”

“Hire seasonal positions earlier...more emphasis on training, especially new hires. Re-fixturing key areas of the garden center and reworking our informational signage for green goods.”

“Stronger merchandising plan. Be more consistent and thorough with our branding; develop accountability and responsibility in our people.”

“Continue to try to create innovative packaging and displays that make it easier for customers to shop.”



Adding good signage is one of the major changes retailers want to add in the future.

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