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## Break in cold weather warms area greenhouses' profit hopes Standing up against huge retail chains



Attention to care such as watering, as done by Juan Paz, is part of small firms' efforts to stand out.  
( THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH )



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With memories of April snow showers and cold spells mostly gone, gardeners started turning out in full force the past few days at local greenhouses, reviving hopes for a good selling season despite competition from large retail chains.

Although business was stunted early on at Hecklinger Greenhouse Inc., a 92-year-old East Toledo wholesaler, it has surpassed a solid 2004 at this point, said Mark Hecklinger, owner. Other local greenhouse owners say sales are ahead of last year, too.

"Now things are going just as fast as we can keep up," Mr. Hecklinger said.

He and other local growers have been making various changes in their businesses. Some of the changes were to ward off growing competition from the likes of Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Lowe's Cos. Inc., Home Depot, and other so-called big-box retailers; other moves were to keep up with consumer demands.

Though Mr. Hecklinger said local and out-of-state retailers who buy plants from him have thrived despite competition from large stores - even Kroger Co. has expanded its outdoor offerings this year - others, like the owners of Creque's Greenhouse in Sylvania Township, said they have noticed a difference.

Co-owner Eileen Creque said sales have been flat the last three years despite efforts to attract customers.

Creque's sells plants wholesale to both big-box and independent retailers, many of whom have reduced their orders both because of competition by the giant chains and because of losses from theft, she said.

At its retail operation, Creque's is trying to go beyond the spike/geranium/vine planter combination that is standard at big-box retailers, Ms. Creque said.

The business, which introduced wicker basket planters three years ago, makes an effort to offer unusual planter arrangements and concentrates on keeping plants well watered and maintained, she said.

"We're going to see what this year will bring," she said. "You got to try to just pay the extra attention."

Maintaining quality and offering the latest varieties have helped Bostdorff Greenhouse Acres north of Bowling Green ward off big-box retailers and others trying to encroach on its business, said Mary Ann Bostdorff, one of the owners.

"Very truthfully, I haven't noticed any difference, which is nice," she said.

Business with Lowe's has been a boon for south Toledo's Ohlman Farm & Greenhouse Inc., which has a store but has concentrated efforts on its wholesale business since the late 1980s.

Ohlman was the first to supply bedding plants to Lowe's at that time, and the business currently partners with Gedert's Greenhouse Inc. of Monclova Township - and gets help from Creque's and other growers as needed - to supply 68 stores in Ohio, said Larry Ohlman, Jr., president.

"They're our success story, really," he said of Lowe's. "It's been a very good working relationship."

Other changes at local greenhouses have nothing to do with big-box stores.

Vegetable plants started selling better last year as the economy continued to struggle and people decided to grow their own produce, in part to help relieve stress, said Mr. Hecklinger of Hecklinger Greenhouse.

Pansies are making a comeback after having wilting sales for decades, Mr. Ohlman said. And various growers said customers who buy flowering annuals are choosing plants that fill 4 1/2-inch or larger pots with showy blooms rather than flats of smaller plants.

"Life is fast-paced," Mr. Ohlman said. "Everybody is busy. People want more instant gratification."

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