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Area garden centers warm up Veteran, novice lawn rangers ready to plant



Pots of geraniums and greens get a weeding from Rosemary Dekker at Black Diamond on Tremainsville Road. (THE BLADE/ALLAN DETRICH)

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Like the products they sell, area garden centers, greenhouses, and nurseries are about ready to bloom.

All that's lacking, their owners say, is sunny weather, drier ground, and a shower of customers. "We're ready to go. Actually, we've been ready for a while," said Jerry Sullivan, manager of Black Diamond Inc. Garden Center in Toledo.

The Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association said state residents spent \$4 billion on landscaping and

nursery items in 2005.

Chris McCullough, a buyer for The Andersons Inc.'s garden center operations, said residents are clearing debris from their yards this time of year and determining what needs to be replaced.

After that, homeowners will put crabgrass killer on their lawns and then move to landscaping, mulching, decorative items, and flats of colorful flowers.

With the weather still alternating between warm and very cool, early-bird gardeners are opting for hardy plants, like primrose, Mr. McCullough said. "Our sales doubled last week just on that cold-hardy stuff," he said.

Ken Gilson, co-owner of Glass City Lawn and Landscape in Springfield Township, said that on warmer days, like last weekend, his business was filled with "die-hard gardeners" eager to get a jump on the season.

"You can tell they had cabin fever all winter," he said. Older gardeners seem to know in advance what they want, but younger gardening enthusiasts seem to be influenced by magazines and the Home and Gardening TV network.

"Whatever's hot in magazines and on HGTV, a lot of younger people are wanting to have things they see on shows," he said.

Meanwhile, at Bench's Greenhouse & Nursery in Elmore, family member Jill Bench said the rush is on for Easter flowers - lilies, hyacinths, tulips, and daffodils.

"People are already buying and ordering them," she said. "We serve a lot of churches in the area, and they already have their orders in."

To jump-start gardening season, the firm holds free weekly seminars on popular gardening and landscaping topics. First up, on April 7, is an Easter topic: flowers mentioned in the Bible that are available in northwest Ohio.

In the interim, Bench's has prepared for sale nearly 11,000 hanging baskets filled with flowers or vegetable plants. "Not everyone has room for a garden," she said.

Veteran gardeners will be happy to hear that the prices of flowers, shrubs, and other landscaping items have not risen this year, Ms. Bench said.

Fertilizers for farmers went up, but there wasn't a big price boost for gardeners, said Mr. McCullough of The Andersons.

That's good because area garden center operators are hoping for a better year. Last year started well but tapered off, operators said.

Part of the optimistic forecast for this year, Mr. McCullough said, stems from Ohio's slumping economy. "When the price of fuel goes up, people tend to stay home and do a lot more gardening," he said.

"Also, the home industry is hurting, and when home sales are down, people stay in and fix up their home. Gardening and landscaping may even help a home sell faster."

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