

# Banner year? No. But greenhouses expect brisk sales again, despite supply backlogs



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Though it may be unrealistic for area greenhouses to enjoy a third consecutive banner year, they are optimistic that the renewed gardening bug that many people got during the pandemic will continue to result in steady sales for years to come.

Supply-chain disruption and higher prices, however, threaten to take some gild off the gardening lily.

The former means it's harder to keep getting products restocked in a timely manner. The last two years' robust sales of young trees and bushes have also created a shortage of them now.

And not only have fertilizer prices increased but so are those of common items like plastic pots, which like most things made of plastic are subject to the rising cost of oil and other materials used to make them.

Tom Wardell, owner of Wardell's Garden Center in Waterville and president of the Maumee Valley Growers, said supply chain issues existed before the pandemic, but worsened because of that and, more recently, by Russia's attack on Ukraine.

The combination of events has made restocking kind of a guessing game for many types of small businesses, including but not limited to greenhouses such as his, he said.

"It's one of those things we really don't know," Mr. Wardell said. "You turn in your orders in the fall. You just don't know what you're going to get and what you won't."

Bottom line for the consumer: Be patient.

Joe Perlaky, the Maumee Valley Growers' executive director, said a common refrain from greenhouse operators has been incomplete deliveries that are late.

"Starting in October, we began noticing incomplete shipments. They were getting shipments, but they were incomplete and they were always late."

There's no single cause, either, for incomplete, late deliveries.

Urea, a nitrogen compound used in fertilizer manufacturing, comes mainly from China. Potash, another important part of fertilizer, is a leading export from Russia although it's also produced in Canada and the western United States.

Once those and other products are delivered from overseas, they still are subject to delays caused by America's shortage of truck drivers and other issues in the supply chain.

"There are so many things. There's not just one thing you can point your finger at and say 'That's the problem,'" Mr. Wardell said.

Zach Edwards, general manager of the Black Diamond stores in Perrysburg Township and West Toledo, agreed.

"Our trucking system domestically is overwhelmed," said Mr. Edwards, the Maumee Valley Growers' secretary. "There are a lot of compounding factors."

There's reasonable optimism, though, because of how the pandemic helped many people rediscover gardening as a healthy form of exercise and recreation that yielded mental-health benefits during the past two years when people spent a lot more time at home avoiding large crowds.

Metroparks Toledo saw how more people used its parks to reconnect with nature, take in a whiff of fresh air, and enjoy hikes or picnics while social distancing from one another.

For similar reasons, more people were drawn to planting fruits, vegetables, and flowers in their back yards and upping their landscaping efforts.

"Our greenhouse growers probably had their best seasons in sales ever in 2020 and 2021," Mr. Perlaky said.

This past off-season was "a very interesting winter season," as greenhouses tried their best to restock their shelves.

"We're pulling out good. But it was dicey for a while," Mr. Perlaky said.

Consumers shouldn't be surprised if they need to visit two or three stores to cobble together everything on their lists, he said.

Greenhouses are now ordering far more of what they need and stockpiling a year or more in advance, based on what's available, Mr. Wardell said.

Like always, the value of small greenhouses such as Mr. Wardell's goes beyond charm.

“The best thing we have to offer is our expertise,” he said. “We can help the customer. We can tell them [what they need], whereas the box stores [often] can’t.”

About all greenhouse operators can do is roll with the flow, and — like other businesses — hope things will eventually straighten themselves back out to some sense of normalcy, whatever that looks like in the future.

“The days of running out of something and getting it restocked in a week or two, or even a month, aren’t back yet and may not be back for a while,” Mr. Edwards said.

Much like in farming, weather plays a factor in the amount of recreational gardening and landscaping people do from year to year, he said.

While Mr. Edwards said he expects business to be solid, he also said it might be unrealistic to think sales will be as brisk for a third consecutive year.

“Every year, there’s a new wrinkle,” he said. “It’s never just one thing.”