



How is your garden center going to do business this spring (2020)?

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New Hampshire's Governor Chris Sununu has listed "Nurseries, greenhouses, garden centers and agriculture supply stores" as "essential services" in his Executive Order 17. Garden centers in neighboring states have not been as fortunate, and many have been forced to miss the beginning of the season already.

Since New Hampshire garden centers are permitted to be open and sell to the public, what should garden center retail look like during a spring of social distancing? Information is available to help keep employees safe from COVID-19 by OSHA and the CDC, but this article will address some of the particular challenges retail will likely present this season.

It's not uncommon for a garden center in New Hampshire to make 50% - 80% of its annual revenue in the month of May, and in a good year that makes for a huge rush of people and some very long days. The governor's order, although permitting garden centers to stay open, still urges businesses to maintain six feet between people and to prohibit all gatherings with more than 10 people! This doesn't describe a typical Saturday in May at a garden center.

How are you going to organize the garden center this spring?

Garden center marketing efforts for years have focused on big events, rewards programs, guest speakers and sales—all of which encourage large numbers of people to shop simultaneously. This spring, separating customers, not just in space, but over time, will be a major focus of retail efforts. This is obviously not the year for big events, open houses, etc. With so many people working from (or staying) home, expect to see less of a difference between gross sales on a Tuesday and on a Saturday.



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Messaging

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Marketing should focus on the hope, healing and new beginnings that gardens bring. Avoid clinical-sounding language; engage your customers with personal-sounding communication. Social media needs to be stepped up this season. In order for your customers to hear your positive message, you will need to be proactive with messaging. Rather than simply post on Facebook, purchase advertisements on social media to reach a greater swath of your audience. Show yourself to be a calm expert who can help people succeed in their yards and homes.

General tips for the garden center this spring:

- Remove endcaps from benches to allow greater room for customers to move. Increase bench spacing.
- Have industrial wipe stations at the cart corral. If this isn't possible, have an employee visibly disinfecting cart handles with disposable towels and disinfectant (if you use a sprayer, make sure it hasn't been used for pesticides). Greenshield and Zeritol (two common greenhouse disinfectants) are not specifically on the EPA/CDC list of chemicals effective on COVID-19 but are approved since they contain the same approved active ingredients as other products on the list. If you can't access disinfectant, the CDC recommends using household bleach diluted at 1/3 cup bleach per gallon of water.
- If you haven't started accepting credit cards, this is the season! Investigate alternative payment methods like Apple Pay, GooglePay, Paypal, etc. Consider adjusting price structure to avoid needing coins during cash transactions. Ask your credit card provider if they have disabled signature requirements for this season.
- Train employees to keep a six-foot distance (demonstrate what this looks like), and train them how to request that customers do the same.
- Train employees in cross-contamination avoidance and how to use gloves and masks properly.
- Signage needs to be top notch to reduce face-to-face time between employees and customers this year.
- Frequently wipe with sanitizer: door handles, bathrooms, carts, register counters, credit card readers, etc. Make sure your credit card reader is secured to the counter so that customers don't need to hold it steady

What will your customers' experiences in your garden center look like this spring? Below are three different approaches, called "Business as usual (but with major modifications!)," "Reduced Contact Retail" and "Zero Contact Retail." Each has its own strengths and drawbacks. Some

garden centers will likely incorporate all three of these, and perhaps other approaches, into their 2020 retail strategy.

Business as usual (but with major modifications!):

Every garden center will need to adjust their retail operation for the safety of their employees and customers. Executive Order 17 urges essential businesses to eliminate gatherings with greater than 10 people, and to maintain six feet distance. This will require some forethought and change for any garden center.

Consider the following “Business as usual (but with major modifications!)” experience and think about which aspects you could institute at your garden center:

A customer arrives at a garden center in her car. She walks to the entrance to the shopping area, where she sees a line of people. A sign explains that only 50 people are being allowed into the garden center at a time. She waits there, observing the lines on the ground which keep her six feet away from the people in front of and behind her in line. When the time comes for her to enter, an employee brings her a cart which has been sprayed with sanitizing solution and has been wiped down.

The sales area has been broken up into several sections (maybe with ribbon or by type of plant and greenhouse), each of which contains several tables, and has a sign saying, “No more than 10 people per area or greenhouse, please.” In the sales area, she sees the same great selection as last year, but fewer pots of each variety are available to purchase. There are signs on the tables which say, “Please choose the pot you want before touching it!” or “Please don’t touch pots you’re not going to take!”, and the pots are spaced out well, allowing her to see each plant without picking it up. At one point, another customer is crowding her, and a well-trained employee cheerfully says, “Social distancing, please! Please leave more space between yourself and other customers.” The customer selects her plants as employees keep the tables stocked.

Near the checkout area, she notices yellow lines on the ground, showing how much distance to leave between people in line. At the register, she is given her own boxes and is asked to pack the material from her cart into her own boxes. As she does so, the cashier rings in each item without having to touch it. When the cashier tallies the sale, the customer chooses to pay with Google Pay, and she doesn’t even have to touch the keypad. If she had touched the credit card reader, the cashier would have given it a sanitizing wipe afterward.

As the customer leaves the sales area, she sees a large cart corral that says, “Please return carts here.” This was a different corral



Executive Order 17

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than the one from which an employee gave her a cart when she entered the sales area. She also notices that as she leaves, an employee allows another waiting customer into the garden center. After packing her own car, the customer returns her cart to the Cart Return Corral, where an employee is spraying sanitizer and wiping down returned carts. She notices that when another customer simply leaves a cart in the parking lot, a gloved employee retrieves the cart, returns it to the Cart Return Corral and discards his gloves.

Think through a typical shopping experience for one of your customers. At each point in the process, what is she touching? Where is she encountering other customers? Where is she encountering employees? How can you reduce cross-contamination and close contact?



Some customers and owners will not be comfortable with the level of contact possible in the COVID-aware scenario above and will want tighter controls. Many garden centers will likely open with “reduced contact.” This may look like the next scenario. Some of the following was adapted from a phone conversation with David Toohey of the Fred C Gloeckner company. David has said that he is more than happy to help garden centers set up and prepare for what he terms “COVID-compliant shopping.”

Don't Forget

Spraying sanitizer and wiping down returned carts is crucial.

Reduced Contact Retail

Consider the following “Reduced Contact Retail” experience and think about which aspects you could institute at your garden center:

A customer arrives at a garden center in her car. She sees parking spaces clearly labelled “For Pre-order Pick-ups” and “For In-Person Shopping Customers.” She reads a sign which reads, “Please remain in your car until an employee directs you to enter the garden center” asking her to remain in her car until the group currently shopping is finished. Perhaps while she is waiting, she can access your free wifi and look at some of your offerings on your website.

As the previous group of customers exits the sales yard, an employee points to her and nine other customers and motions to follow (let's call this employee the “shopping guide”). The shopping guide offers each customer a sterilized cart (without touching the carts), and the entire group walks down to the sales area, maintaining a six foot distance. Sales tables have been set up with a selection of plants (perhaps with fewer pots of each than in a typical year), and the employee has access to a stack of boxes. The shopping guide asks each customer for a name, and quickly writes a name on a box for each customer.

The customers are kept six feet back from the display benches, where they can see, but not touch. Each customer asks for plants to be put in her box by the shopping guide, while restating his or her own name. After everyone has “shopped” the sales area, they proceed to checkout. In

larger garden centers, perhaps the entire group moves to another area of the garden center: perennials, nursery, etc. The next group can then be moved from the parking lot to the first sales area with a different shopping guide. The shopping guide brings the customer boxes on a large wagon to the sales area and loads them on the cashier's counter. The customer has not yet touched a box or a pot.

At checkout, yellow lines on the floor separate the customers six feet from one another and from the cashier. The plants are still not yet in the customer's possession but are arranged on a long register counter. The shopping guide can be tallying up the sales of the people in line while they wait. As each customer gets to the register, the tally is entered to the register and she pays for her sale, using a limited contact payment method. Each customer returns to his or her car, and the shopping guide places that customer's boxes in the trunk of the car. If the customer needs to place boxes inside the passenger section of the the car, the shopping guide simply places the box on the ground, and leaves, allowing the customer to exit her car and load it herself. This is the first time that a customer will touch a box or a pot and has not touched a wagon. The shopping guide gives a friendly wave, goes inside, washes her hands and wipes down the cart. She then returns to the parking lot to escort the next customer group.

Is this a huge hassle? Yes. Do you immediately think of 10 things your customers won't go for in this scenario? Of course! Will you pick and choose aspects of this scenario to apply to your garden center? Quite likely! Policies and procedures need to be put in place that allow you to keep your employees and customers safe, while still moving a ton of product during a busy season.

Zero Contact Retail

Many customers may want "zero contact" sales this spring. What might that look like? Much of the following was adapted from a presentation given by Rob Sproule, founder of DIG Marketing and hosted by *Garden Center Magazine*.

Have an e-commerce presence. It's likely too late for this season to start with an e-commerce company, but this can be as simple as having an inventory list online. Perhaps this exists on your website, perhaps you will create a spreadsheet and upload it to a Google Drive folder and invite your email list to view it. Consider a do-it-yourself e-commerce platform like Squarespace.

We all know that customers buy more when they can see beautiful product. Consider a "concierge shopping" option. A customer books a virtual shopping time with one of your employees using an online calendar service like Calendly. The employee then has a 30-minute Zoom or



Don't Forget

Think through the customer's entire shopping experience from arrival to departure.

Skype session with the customer using a tablet, showing your actual inventory. As the customer picks out material, the employee loads a cart. At the end of the session, the employee completes the sale remotely using a credit card or PayPal. The order is then placed to the side until the customer arrives and parks in one of the “Pick Up” spaces. She then texts when she has arrived, like the end of the transaction in the scenario detailed below. Although this is not the season to increase prices (avoid all appearance of “gouging”), a 10% to 15% upcharge for “concierge shopping” is reasonable.

Consider expanding delivery services this year, but don’t spread your labor too thin by driving small deliveries.

Consider the following “Zero Contact Retail” experience and think about which aspects you could institute at your garden center:

A customer navigates to a garden center’s website where she sees an invitation to shop the inventory on Google Drive. On the Google Drive page, she sees that if her order is in before 3 p.m., she can pick up her plants at the garden center the next day between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.. She copies the items she wants into an email and sends it to the garden center. The garden center calls back to take payment and to confirm the order.

In a normal spring, this garden center stays open until 8 p.m. on weekdays for the after-work rush. This spring, however, it has decided to close to the public at 5 p.m., giving them three hours to disinfect and to pull the internet orders that came in over the course of the day. At 5 p.m., some of the employees get a list of the day’s internet orders and pull them all into labelled boxes. These completed orders sit overnight in an area dedicated to internet orders.

At about 10:30 a.m. the next morning, the customer drives to the garden center. She sees five spaces dedicated to internet order pick-up, each with a sign that reads, “Internet Order Pick-up Space #4. Please text your name and space # to (603) 555-5555 when you arrive. Please allow 15 minutes for delivery.” She texts her name and space number and waits. Meanwhile, an employee has seen the text and retrieves the customer’s order by placing the prepacked boxes on a cart. The employee pulls the cart out to Space #4, parks the cart, gives a thumbs-up to the customer and leaves. The customer exits the car, loads the boxes into her car and drives away. At this point, an employee returns to the lot wearing gloves, sanitizes the cart with a sprayer and cloth and returns the cart to the clean cart corral.

Are there much more sophisticated ways to do e-commerce? Certainly! (Check out Squarespace and others). Will you be able to move your entire inventory this way? Probably not! Will you have customers who want to purchase material remotely? Absolutely.



e-commerce

Allowing customers to shop online can help create “Zero Contact Retail” experiences.



Conclusion

May of 2020 will be like none other seen in independent garden centers. Early indicators from Southern states are that it may be a good year for sales, but you must plan now for how you will address customer concerns and make your garden center safe for your employees and customers. Governor's Sununu's order in New Hampshire was very generous to independent garden centers, compared to neighboring states. Let's take the accompanying responsibility very seriously and show that New Hampshire's independent garden centers can rise to the challenge of providing the people of New Hampshire with top quality plants and hard goods with top-notch gardening advice in safe, controlled environments.

UNH Extension is here to help. Contact your county's field specialist. Sign up for the "Landscape and Greenhouse Horticulture Newsletter" for timely tips and updates. And be safe!



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