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COVER STORY

As spring 2020 put fresh spins on gardening, IGCs. Jolene Hansen

Gardens with purpose

vegetables spelled "victory" for new gardeners and

GARDENS with PURPOSE PUT FRESH SPINS EGETABLES SPELLED "VICTORY" FOR NEW GARDENERS The garden center industry has seen quite the boom in vegetable gardening, and retailers are noticing positive trends when it comes to serving the tidal wave of gardeners. Looking back just six months ago, the feeling of uncertainty that swept over the garden center industry still feels fresh. As COVID-19 paralyzed businesses and supply chains, no one knew what would come next. But fears of a lost season were soon supplanted by a flood of new gardeners that lifted many IGCs to their best year yet.

EARTH'S ALLY

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EFFECTIVE RESPONSIBLE We donate a portion of our profits EarthsAlly.com sales@sarasotagg.com (http://giecdn.azurewebsites.net/advertisement/click? adId=73945&issueId=103759&subscriptionId=null) The starting point for this influx of interest was remarkably constant from coast to coast. For some gardeners, COVID "victory gardens" rooted in World War II nostalgia held strong allure. For others, the idea of modern self-sufficiency and control held sway. But from one gardening perspective to another, vegetables led the way. ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

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For insights on how vegetable gardening became a gateway to something bigger, we spoke with IGCs from California to Ohio to New York. Here's what they saw this year: **SLOAT GARDEN CENTER** San Francisco Bay Area, California

The concept of victory gardens resurfaced last spring, thanks in large part to the National Garden Bureau's victory garden media campaign. Sloat Garden Center's 12 Bay Area locations embraced the idea and promoted victory gardening via social media, newsletters and instore. President and Chief Operations Officer Dave Stoner reports positive

customer feedback, but a more modern take on vegetable garden

"Whether it was victory gardens or just being prepared for not knowing what the food supply was going to be come summer — or just the fact that people were home and concerned — gardening

PHOTOS COURESY OF SLOAT GARDEN CENTER

victories was also underway.

definitely played a role in limiting those concerns," he says. "Vegetable gardens did it two-fold because they were growing food." As vegetable sales soared, Stoner noticed two camps. On one hand, seasoned veggie gardeners upped their efforts "just in case," planting more than ever before. "The other extreme was people that have never thought about where their tomatoes come from, let alone that they come from a plant, saying, 'I'm going to grow a tomato,'" Stoner says. Your Farm to Your Table To help inexperienced gardeners, Sloat employees answered many questions via email and shifted much of their education focus to online methods. Handouts were

once popular, but many customers feared COVID concerns, and the IGC had to

Questions emailed to Sloat's Garden Guru reflected the newness of gardeners involved. "It exploded this year. We had to double our force as far as answering those questions. But the quality of those questions also diminished dramatically because there was so much

answering basic questions like 'Why doesn't my tomato have fruit

To help new gardeners, Sloat focused mainly on in-store information and communications. But in-store handouts that had been popular lost their appeal to new vegetable gardeners with COVID concerns. "Nobody wanted to touch anything," Stoner shares. So, the IGC

inexperience out there," Stoner reports. "We found we were

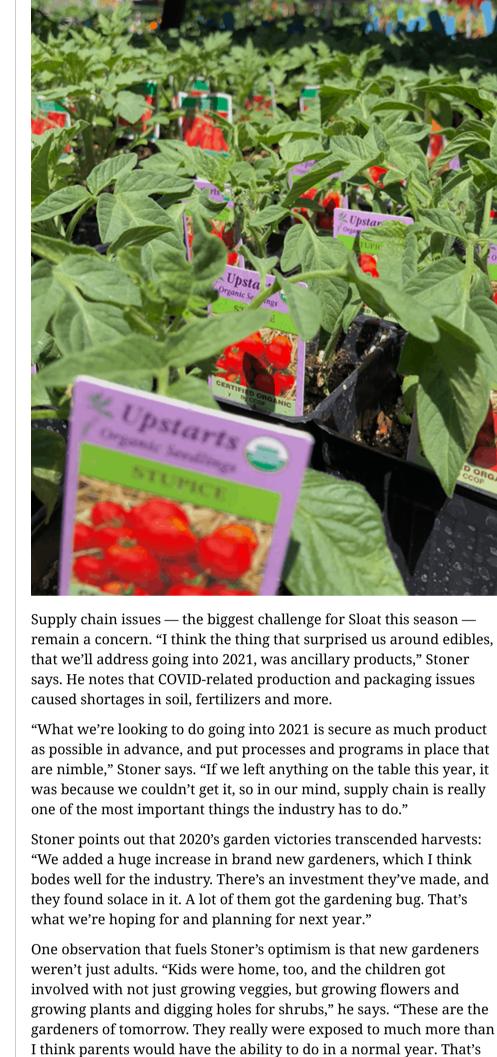
adapt. Edible, annual and vegetable sales soared for the IGC.

yet? I've had it for two weeks."

quickly moved to get more online.

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"One thing we've learned initially is that our company is grossly underrepresented with e-commerce, which is something we've never ventured into," he says. "We've been pretty simple in our approach, pretty true to our core and to our brick-and-mortar, and it serves us really well. But we've learned there's some avenues that we need to focus on moving forward." As new vegetable gardeners realized work-from-home would continue, Sloat saw interests evolve. "The first month was nothing but edibles," Stoner says. Annuals were next. Vegetables kept skyrocketing, but focus shifted to landscaping and nursery stock. As the Bay Area enters fall planting season, interest continues strong overall. Why Organic? Promotes a healthy, safe lifestyle for your family and children No chemical pesticides No synthetic fertilizers



really exciting."

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THE DEES' NURSERY & FLORIST

The Dees' Nursery & Florist Co-owner Joe DiDominica

delivers orders during the 2020 rush.

change take hold. "Folks were saying they had to do something to get out of the house, keep themselves occupied and do something with the kids," he says. "That transformed into seed starting and teaching kids how to add a garden. We had a lot of people who had never

Dees' promoted COVID victory gardens on social media, but DiDominica says that victories became more personal: "Victory gardening was out there, but vegetable gardening just took on a whole new thing. It was self-reliance. It was 'I want to grow my own

Early on, New Yorkers were hesitant to go out and shop, so they hit the phones instead. With just four regular staff on board, down from 21, DiDominica's four daughters jumped in as telephone operators. "Like everybody, we really increased our phone order sales. I

increased my online sales about 10-fold from the previous year," he says. "We really transformed our business in a short, short period of

Reticence to shop in-store eventually passed. "As things started lightening up, people weren't afraid to come out," DiDominica says. "Next thing, they started penetrating into our store a little bit and

To help new gardeners, Dees' turned to handouts on starting seeds, prepping soil and planting. Veggie basics such as peppers, cucumbers and tomatoes were top sellers, but all vegetables sold well. Among herbs, basil was No. 1, with Mojito mint for cocktails coming on strong. "People couldn't go out to the bars, so they're going to have

their own little party at their house. They need Mojito mint,"

The fervor for gardening expanded into other categories as Long Islanders skipped vacations and focused on home improvement instead. "Summer sales have been excellent," DiDominica says.

"Everybody wanted to fix up their yards. As long as you had products,

food.' People wanted to take care of themselves."

Long Island, New York When coronavirus hit New York City this spring, emotions ran high at The Dees' Nursery & Florist. Co-

DiDominica explains, "We were in the hot bed at the time. Long Island was the first hotbed of COVID-19. Obviously, now it's the safest place in the country, but our area was pretty much shuttered. It shut down, but we were luckily allowed to

owner Joe

stay open."

With people

time."

then it was game on."

DiDominica says.

next year.

Northeast Ohio

last year," he shares.

seeing that now.

still strong," he says.

made a huge difference."

Cinderella year."

New gardeners account for much of that growth. "We picked up about a

you were able to have good days."

quarantined at home,

DiDominica saw a

What started with vegetables and segued to nursery stock has shifted to houseplants now, as people working from home want to grow plants indoors, too. "Houseplants were in an upward trend before COVID-19, but now this has supercharged it and really has increased that," DiDominica says. "They're booming now." Spring's biggest surprise in DiDominca's mind was how quickly the season turned around and who got involved. "I was really happy to

your vegetable garden, became a family event again."

bode well for our industry as we move forward."

PETITTI GARDEN CENTERS

As late-winter talk about COVID victory

gardens circulated the country, customers at Petitti Garden Centers' nine Northeast Ohio locations seemed to take a more direct approach. "In terms of the actual victory garden, it wasn't a trend that we saw people rally around. It wasn't a huge call to action in our area," says President AJ Petitti. But vegetable gardening itself was a different story. "We picked up about 43% on herbs and veggies compared to

see how many families did it together," he says. "Gardening turned back to kind of like the old days, where kids were doing it with their parents. You haven't seen that a lot. Working outside in your yard, in

DiDominica hopes 2020's vegetable-fueled gardening victories stick: "When you work in the yard, it's a feeling of accomplishment and you never want to go backward. Why would you not want that again for next year? We definitely have opened our doors to a whole new group of new homeowners and younger people. I think it's going to

Looking to 2021, DiDominica's predictions sound a lot like Stoner and Petitti. "I definitely see an opportunity of maybe 10% to 20% increase over [2019] sales, which was a great year," he says. "It would be very

hard to duplicate what happened this year, but we're definitely bullish for our industry, our business, for next spring." And,

incidentally, he won't be surprised if vegetables help lead the way

gardeners. I think existing gardeners did more because they had more time, but we definitely drew a lot of new customers. They got to experience our stores and our product for the first time. And I think that's going to carry over, hopefully for years to come." Across the grower-retailer's stores, no single category of edibles or non-edibles stands out. "In terms of variety, just everything went. Demand was just huge this year," Petitti says. "We grow 90% of what we sell, so fortunately we were able to keep planting and keep producing all along. When everybody was struggling to get product, we were able to make sure we had a continual supply." Petitti reports that spring annuals and vegetables both started very strong and went hand-in-hand until mid-July. As vegetables quieted down — typical for summer — other categories stepped in. "But in fall, there's renewed interest in cole crops and fall veggies, so we're

Obviously, that's not as strong as what it would be in spring, but it's

To help new gardeners succeed, Petitti fortified their phone resources.

corporate office and moved the questions off the stores," he says. "A

experienced people speaking to our newest customers, which I think

Looking to 2021, Petitti expects a strong year. "I don't see it being as strong as it was this year, so we're taking our initial 2020 plan and we're bumping that up," he says. "I think it'd be really difficult for us to see it increase off of what we saw this year. This was kind of a

He advises IGC owners to plan carefully for 2021. "I think it's really tempting to either go way short or way over in terms of planning —

"Everybody picked up new customers and there was a great interest in gardening. But I don't know what's going to stick, especially as families get busier again, depending on what happens to schooling and activities and all that stuff. I think 2021 is still going to be really

The author is a Minnesota-based freelance writer specializing in the horticulture industry. Reach her at **jolene@jolenehansen.com**

whether you're buying or whether you're growing," he says.

strong, but we're in a little bit of a bubble right now."

(mailto://jolene@jolenehansen.com).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PETITTI GARDEN CENTERS

"One of the biggest things was we started a call center in our

lot of those calls were from new gardeners, so we had really

27% increase in customer traffic in terms of transactions," Petitti shares. "Clearly, I think a lot of that was driven by a lot of new

AJ Petitti

PHOTO COURTESY OF PETITTI GARDEN

In 2020, Petitti Garden Centers' herb and veggie sales skyrocketed 43% compared

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