

# Nursery industry: A boost from stay-at-home year

By MIA RYDER-MARKS  
Capital Press

Like most of Oregon's nurseries, Peoria Gardens Inc. has had a "very fortunate" year so far.

Ben Verhoeven, the second-generation owner of the nursery, said the combination of good weather and people staying at home have boosted his season.

"As people were staying at home, and often working from home and they weren't able to spend money on travel and leisure activities, we saw a lot of people kind of take interest in beautifying ... their homes," he said.



Nationally, the nursery industry experienced a similar boost.

Charlie Hall, a horti-

cultural economist and professor at Texas A&M University, said that in 2020, 75% of nurs-

ery growers experienced sales increases ranging from 5% to 25%. He said it is a good indicator that the housing sector is performing well. The housing boom has driven the demand for many nursery plants, including edible plants, flowers and shrubs.

## Labor shortages

As sales increase, the industry's labor shortage gets worse.

Nurseries across the state have for years struggled with a tight labor market. However, some in the industry say it is notably worse this year.

"Labor shortages are a problem in the industry,

and always have been," said Curt Kipp, communications and marketing director for the Oregon Association of Nurseries. But for some nursery owners, this year's labor situation is concerning.

Mark Krautmann owns Heritage Seedlings & Liners in Marion County and said he cannot get enough labor. "The whole labor thing has gotten to the crisis point," he said.

Krautmann said that the nursery industry is experiencing such a high demand for labor that if his contractors receive an offer that is a quarter of a dollar more, "they'll literally drop their tools and leave."

According to OAN's 2019 figures, about 9,162 people are employed by Oregon nurseries. Oregon is one of the top three nursery-producing states in the U.S., and nursery stock ranks as the top agricultural commodity in the state.

Brooks Tree Farm has also experienced a labor shortage for years. Kathy LeCompte, owner of the nursery, told Capital Press that it keeps getting worse as the years progress and points to the need for immigration reform to alleviate the

problem.

"We desperately need common sense, agreed upon planned immigration legislation that specifically benefits people that have the jobs that Americans don't want," LeCompte said. "None of us want to take a job away from an American who wants it, (but) there are so many jobs in agriculture, landscaping, the dairy industry, fisheries ... that Americans just don't want."

She added: "We desperately need to get those filled."

## Looking forward

Hall, the economist, said the industry outlook is looking strong for next spring, and the industry shouldn't worry about an economic downturn until 2023 at the earliest.

However, there are some things the industry cannot predict that could impact it — such as the spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 or the federal government raising interest rates too quickly and the housing boom cooling off.

"We're all hopeful that by 2022 it's normal, except that there's a lot more people gardening," Verhoeven said.

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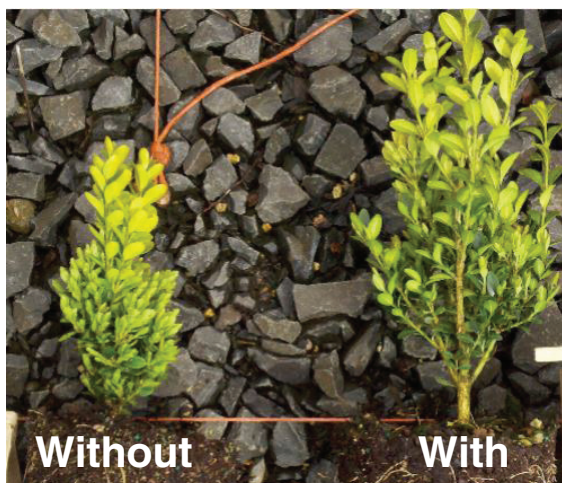
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