

COVID-19 affect on nursery industry is a mixed bag

By KATHY ANEY
STAFF WRITER

COVID-19 is motivating people to pick up a trowel and get gardening.

Maybe it's worry about empty grocery shelves or boredom during quarantine, but many plant nurseries and seed companies say business is booming.

"We're super busy," said Tania Hoeft, manager of Kopacz Nursery & Floral in Hermiston. "We're busier than we usually are and a lot of people are calling to find out if we're open."

The nursery ran low on tomatoes and is selling soil and compost at an unprecedented clip. Many customers are first-timers.

"They haven't gardened in the past or they are starting back up," Hoeft said.

The gardening boom is reminiscent of World War I and World War II when people planted victory gardens to prepare for wartime food shortages.

John Borchert, owner of Victorian Gardens in Milton-Freewater, said he is noticing the same.

"Everyone is home gardening," Borchert said. "We've had a steady trickle of customers."

Gov. Kate Brown's executive order on March 20 to temporarily close certain businesses didn't mention nurseries. However, even essential businesses must enforce physical distancing in accordance with Oregon Health Authority guidelines.

"We're limiting shopping to eight people at a time and making sure they're spread out," Borchert said.

Newbie gardeners are looking for guidance. More than 15,000 people registered for the Oregon State University Extension Service vegetable gardening course the week after OSU announced it would waive the usual \$45 fee.

"Currently, we have over



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Rossy Garcia plants Roma tomato starts into larger containers in preparation for their sale at Kopacz Nursery & Florist in Hermiston on Tuesday morning.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
A shopper wearing a mask stops to check her plants while shopping at Kopacz Nursery & Florist in Hermiston on Tuesday morning.

28,000 enrolled," said horticulture professor Gail Langellotto, who coordinates the state's master gardener program. "We normally get about 20 people who sign up for the course in a normal year."

Territorial Seed, of Cottage Grove, experienced such a surge in orders that the CEO wrote an open letter telling customers the company would accept no new orders for approximately two weeks.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented demand for our seed products," wrote Tom Johns. "Many Americans are cocooning at home — understandably motivated to be self-reliant for as much of their own fresh food as possible."

The Cottage Grove storefront closed and some of the staff reassigned to help fill existing orders.

"My wife, Julie, and I have been in the seed business for 35 years and have never experienced anything



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Kopacz Nursery & Florist manager Tania Hoeft waters sprouts in a greenhouse at the nursery in Hermiston on Tuesday morning.

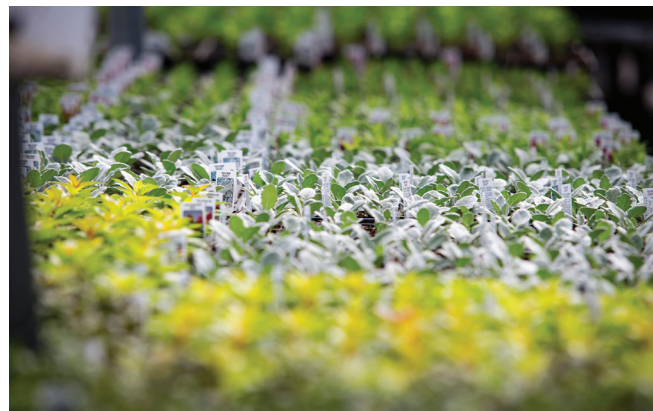
comparable to this," Johns wrote.

Not all parts of the nursery industry, the second biggest agricultural sector in Oregon, are experiencing the surge.

"It's a mixed bag," said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries. While some nurseries are going

gangbusters, he said, others are struggling. Because of economic uncertainty, retailers are ordering fewer ornamentals and flowers. In addition, the pandemic brought a flurry of canceled events, such as weddings.

In the nursery business, Stone said, timing is everything. As much as 70% of the year's income comes in



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Rows of plants sit in the greenhouses at Kopacz Nursery & Florist in Hermiston on Tuesday morning.

a roughly six-week period. The Oregon nursery industry ships about 75% of its stock out of state. Some growers who rely on geographically distant customers are experiencing curtailed orders just before peak shipping time.

"There's no good time for a pandemic," Stone said, "but timing could not have been worse. It is make-or-

break time." Borchert and other local nursery owners are enjoying a surge in gardening, but he worries about Mother's Day and all those hanging baskets he and his staff planted for the yearly celebration.

"People are definitely gardening," he said, "but I'm not sure how the gift market will be."

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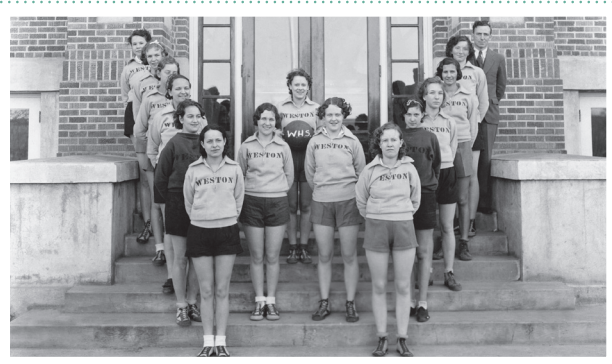
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