

HOMEGARDEN

Nurseries Begin To Regain Their Feet

BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The sea change sweeping through California's nursery business continues to make waves.

Target is phasing out its garden centers while adding more space for groceries. Meanwhile, Home Depot, the nation's No. 1 nursery retailer, is making more space for vegetable plants and fruit trees, plus succulents and colorful annuals.

On the other end of the scale, small mom-and-pop nurseries have seen business tick upward as they focus on personalized service and expert advice.

"On the growers' side, a lot of companies have gone out of business," said Tim Obert, Home Depot's lawn and garden buyer for the West Coast. "On the consumer side, with the lack of construction, sales of big-ticket landscaping (for new homes) have gone way down. People aren't buying big trees and foundation plants."

During the recession, nurseries have seen their business drop dramatically after 15 years of steady growth.

Most of California's nursery crops are grown along the temperate central and south coasts, in areas where land is expensive and population dense.

"With the economy being down, their land was worth more than the nursery product," Obert said. "We've seen companies like (rose giant) Jackson & Perkins go bankrupt. That's quite a big shock and a big name in the rose community."

"Instead of shrubs or ornamentals, customers are gravitating toward color (such as bedding plants)," he added. "It's an easy way to spruce up your home — or make a foreclosure look good."

At the Target store on Riverside Boulevard in Sacramento, the garden center represented a microcosm of current trends: lots of vegetables, succulents, perennials and drought-tolerant plants. But that was not enough.



Shoppers Terri and Rick Green of Galt look at flowers in the nursery department at Home Depot in Elk Grove, California, Thursday, September 2, 2010.

"The garden centers were no longer profitable for us," said national Target spokeswoman Jenna Reck from the company's Minneapolis headquarters. "We have 262 garden centers (out of 1,743 stores nationwide), mostly in California and Florida. So it was really a small part of our overall operation. But (the garden centers) will all be closing in September."

Customers are already mourning the loss. "I was not happy when I heard they were going to add food and take away plants," said

Amy Salmon, a Sacramento mother of eight. "I rarely buy any food at Target. I have a large family, and I do my food shopping in bulk. But I really like their plant area."

Recent trends have shown consumers are returning to independent garden centers while nursery sales at retail chain stores such as Kmart, Rite Aid or Target have sharply declined. Big box home centers account for 49 percent of total sales, with the independent sector getting 44 percent, according to a recent industry

study by Nursery Retailer magazine. Chain stores — which had 40 percent of the market in the mid-1990s — have plunged to 7 percent.

"The pendulum is starting to swing back to independent nurseries," said John Adams, owner of Sierra Nursery in Roseville, Calif. "It doesn't really surprise me that big guys like Target are pulling out."

Adams and his wife, Lyn, bought Sierra Nursery almost four years ago, just before the real estate bubble burst. With the recession, they have seen

business drop off significantly. No new homes has meant no all-new backyards and landscape projects.

"The good news for 2010: For the first time since we bought the business, sales are heading back in the right direction," said John Adams, estimating sales are up about 6 percent this year.

Independent nurseries often offer what big box stores can't: Highly personalized service and expertise, Adams added. "It's definitely a fight every day, one customer at a time,"

said Ashley Gill, marketing director for Green Acres, a family-owned nursery with locations in Sacramento and Roseville.

Added Adams: "People are spending more time at home and in their gardens. They want to be successful. They're going to folks they think will give them the right answers to their questions and sell quality plants."

Increased interest in vegetable gardening has helped buoy nurseries during the recession. "Vegetable sales are huge for us," Gill said. "If we can sell you vegetables, we're hopeful you'll come back for lawn fertilizer."

Edible plant sales continue to boom for the second consecutive summer, with sales up double digits for major retailers, as gardeners branch out from tomatoes and zucchini into blueberries and citrus.

Lower prices through volume buying are where large chains have held a big edge over small independents. A typical Home Depot may see its inventory of bedding and vegetable plants turn over almost daily during spring. The economy also has led to the consolidation of growers and liquidation of stock.

"We've seen a lot of 'wow' buys; crazy, wild deals," Obert said. "We've seen queen palms that were \$200 two years ago sell for \$20."

But the little guys have started to band together in cooperatives. For example, the Concord, Calif.-based Master Nursery Garden Centers represents more than 750 independently owned nurseries, including Adams' Sierra.

"Another plus are private-label products (such as fertilizers and soil mixes) that you won't find in the big box stores," Adams said.

Meanwhile, the countdown at Target continues.

"I was just there and I walked through the nursery, but nothing had changed — yet," Salmon said. "I keep waiting for the big plant sale to begin."

Diggin' In: Fall Vegetables To Plant Now

BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM

Daily Press (Newport News, Va.)

Fall offers some of the best vegetable gardening.

In fact, autumn's cool weather and Jack Frost's nippy touches can enhance the flavor of healthy greens like collards. Spinach often survives winter, giving you a source of valuable iron, vitamins and beta-carotene through spring.

Garlic is always best planted in September-October; planting a single clove yields a full head the next summer, according to Organic Gardening magazine. Mulch your garlic patch with straw to keep weeds down and soil moist.

Plus, fall gardens often have fewer insect problems because peak insect activity happens mostly mid-summer.

When you plant a fall vegetable, be prepared to protect crops from heavy frosts, covering rows with burlap or a floating row cover made from special lightweight material supported by stakes or wire to keep it from directly touching plants. Milk jugs of warmed water can be placed by individual plants to protect them at night.

A fall garden can be simple to plant and maintain, especially if you create it in large containers on deck.

Containers offer many advantages to fall vegetable gardens. The potting mix is free of insects and diseases, so vegetable transplants available now at local garden centers get off to a good start quickly. You can protect young, tender plants from the hot sun, storms and pests by moving containers to sheltered locations. You can also grow plants longer into the fall by protecting them from frosts and moving the pots into the sunny spots once the days get cooler and plant growth slows.



Mustard greens, mums and ornamental cabbage are grouped in a Kinsman planter.

If you plant fall flowers like pansies and ornamental cabbages in containers, consider adding some vegetables and herbs to the mix.

Pamela Crawford's book, "Easy Container Combs: Vegetables and Flowers," features some combinations that are quick and easy to duplicate anywhere you garden — on a balcony, patio, deck, porch or tucked among plants in your garden.

Here are some of her quick tips for planting productive, pretty, patio pots:

Start with transplants. Transplants are much quicker and easier than growing from seed. Locally, you will see Bonnie Plants vegetables and herbs at most local

garden centers.

Keep containers simple. Two to three varieties per pot are plenty. When picking your plants, be sure to read tags before you buy your varieties. You can't just pick any flower and vegetable and plant them together in a container; varieties require similar sunlight conditions and should have similar growing habits.

Combs like large containers that have drainage holes in the bottom. Vegetables will grow larger and produce more fruit when roots have more space to grow. More water can be stored, you won't have to haul out the hose as much and most vegetables just look better in bigger containers. Drainage holes are extremely

important so roots don't rot.

Plant as close as you can. Container gardens are planted much closer together than gardens in the ground. Don't be afraid to plant varieties close together in your container, and yes, plants will live and flourish!

Create a centerpiece. A centerpiece can be any type of plant as long as it remains taller than surrounding plants for the life of the arrangement. Choose a plant that is full or you can combine several skinny plants to create your focal point.

Don't forget flowers. Add pretty petals in, vegetables can get leggy. Be sure to plant flower varieties around the base edge of the container, you'll cover up leggy stems, add some pop and soften the look.

Add a little TLC. Once you've selected your plants, fill your pot with a good potting mix (garden soil is too heavy), sprinkle in some plant food and water about every other day.

Learn more about Pamela Crawford's tips on edible container gardening at www.kinsmangarden.com

Learn more about vegetable gardening year-round at www.BonniePlants.com

FALL CROPS TO PLANT

- Asparagus
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Cauliflower
- Collards
- Garlic
- Kale
- Lettuce
- Mustard
- Onions
- Parsnips
- Peas
- Radishes
- Spinach
- Turnips



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- Child's first name and age will be printed on the back of the Christmas Card.

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Please write child's first name, age, phone number and school on back of drawing.



Entry deadline September 30, 2010.

Press & Dakotan staff will judge drawings.

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