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SPRING SURVIVAL *Guide*

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information
you need to
prepare for
your busiest
season.



+
SURVIVAL
TIPS FROM
TOP IGCS
PG. 34

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contents

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:: Spring Survival Guide

- 20 **CONSUMER INSIGHTS**
Easy as X, Y, Z
Big differences in generational garden spending and goals should drive IGCs in 2024.
- 24 **ECONOMIC OUTLOOK**
Stop and Go
The economy may slow early in 2024 before accelerating into 2025.
- 28 **WEATHER OUTLOOK**
Weathering the Spring
A strong El Niño year may drive earlier planting and sales demand for northern regions of North America.
- 34 **BEST PRACTICES**
Tips From the Top
Tips for spring survival from some of the Top 100 garden centers.

- 40 **PLANTS**
2023 Trial Standouts
This year's best performing varieties from trial gardens around the country.



:: The Regulars

- 4 **Editor's Note**
- 48 **Marketplace/Ad Index**
- 50 **Last Look**
Feed the birds



:: Departments

- 6 **Spotted!**
Industry news, new products and marketing ideas
- 10 **Retail Revival**
Essential staff training
- 12 **Leadership Landscape**
Community connections



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Survive to Thrive

I'M A HUGE FAN of The History Channel survival series "Alone." Each season, a group of contestants is flown into the wilderness and dropped miles apart from one another with nothing but a rucksack of basic supplies. Over many weeks, they film themselves as they build shelter and forage and hunt in order to outlast their competitors.

I found the program during pandemic times. We all felt alone back then, so the show was very fitting. It was deeply comforting to see a bunch of wild-minded survival experts digging deep into reserves of resilience and fortitude to overcome fear, hunger, loneliness and pain. Heck, if they could make it in the Canadian wilderness, then I could make it in the Ohio suburbs. I mean, I didn't even have to whittle a spoon to eat stew...unless I wanted to.

I think many in the "Alone" audience, me included, felt like they could probably do a week or two in the middle of nowhere with some gumption, dumb luck and maybe a YouTube video or two about how to start a fire without a match. But the reality is that those who thrive on "Alone" are the ones who have been studying survival techniques and "bushcraft" for many years. It's clear that to stick through the toughest times, it's not enough to simply have tenacity. It is crucial to draw from a deep well of knowledge.

It is a tad hyperbolic to suggest that springtime in a garden center is anything like the blasted mountains of Patagonia or the bear-infested lake lands of the Arctic Circle. I truly hope that surviving your busiest season doesn't require snaring small rodents for sustenance or rubbing a couple sticks together for warmth. Still, I'm sure it can feel like being stalked by predators as you try to keep your customers happy and your benches full. And there's always a chance for adrenaline spikes when things go sideways — like a POS system on the fritz or an employee down due to injury or sickness.

Happily, unlike a survival reality show contestant, you are not alone — far from it. In this issue, we're acting as your stalwart ally and guide. Our goal? To help you conquer



your busiest season by providing a ton of information to bolster your inner reserves of stick-to-itiveness as you approach your seasonal 10-week crucible. These pages are intended to help you think strategically about how to come out on top at the end of spring.

To that end, we are preparing you for 2024 with some crucial outlooks. We spoke with the chief economist of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to acquire economic insights for the coming year (pg. 24). We also spoke to meteorologist Joe Woznicki from the Commodity Weather Group for a national weather outlook (pg. 28). Beyond weather and the economy, we offer a data-rich view into the gardening outlook for 2024 courtesy of marketing insight company Axiom (pg. 20). We also have a deep dive into the best plants from recent plant trials nationwide (pg. 40) and a bevy of actionable spring survival tips from some of our Top 100 garden centers (pg. 34).

With these tools at your disposal, I believe that, like the best contestants on "Alone," you will go beyond survival and thrive.

Each episode of "Alone" begins with a quote from a famous adventurer. So, I'll follow suit and begin our issue with one as well:

"Survival can be summed up in three words — never give up. That's the heart of it, really. Just keep trying." —Bear Grylls

Here's to an amazing 2024 and an amazing spring. Never give up.

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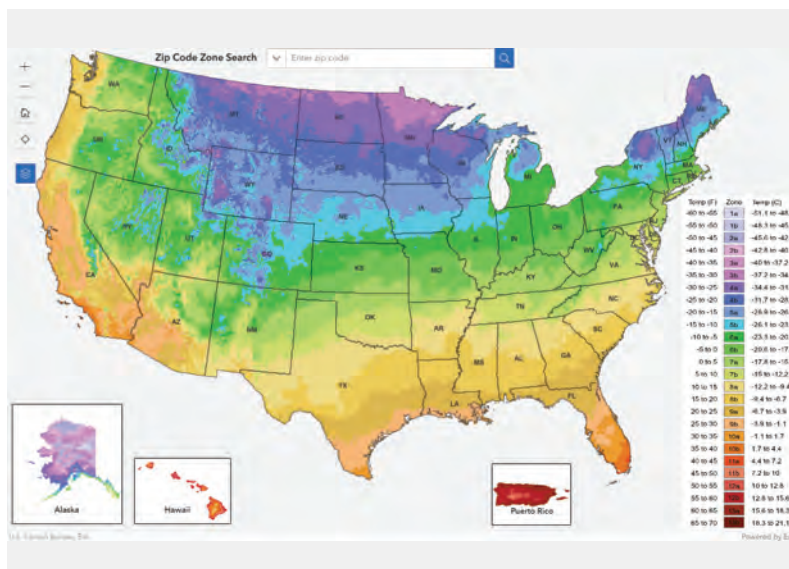
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Industry News

ZONE CREEP

The USDA's Agricultural Research Service and Oregon State University's PRISM Climate Group have updated the Plant Hardiness Zone Map for the first time since 2012. Half the country shifted to the next warmer half-zone, while the other half of the country remained in the same half-zone. The national differences in zonal boundaries are mostly a result of incorporating temperature data from a more recent period. While it's tempting to peg plant hardiness zones updates to global climate change, they're not necessarily reflective of broader climate shifts. That's due to the highly variable nature of the extreme minimum temperature of the year, as well as the use of increasingly sophisticated mapping methods and the inclusion of data from more weather stations. A hard copy version isn't available, but you can download and print copies for free at bit.ly/phzm23.



The Plant Hardiness Zone Map has been updated for the first time since 2012.

HRI'S LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

The Horticultural Research Institute is accepting applications for the Leadership Academy class of 2025 until Feb. 9.

The one-year program offers an opportunity for green industry leaders to enhance their leadership skills, broaden their horticultural knowledge and network with industry professionals. It consists of in-person training sessions and virtual online classes and meetings.

Applications will be evaluated on demonstrated leadership qualities; past evidence of or estimated future potential for contribution to the green industry; ability to consider the broader interests of the community; the applicant's character and ability to grow because of the experience; and personal and employer commitment to the program. Preference will be given to candidates with at least five years of leadership experience and seven years of relevant industry work experience.

Interviews will be in March and April 2024, with class selection and notification in May 2024 and the class announcement at Cultivate'24 (July 13-16). There's no fee to apply, and program tuition is covered by AmericanHort. For more information, visit HRILeadershipAcademy.org.



Applications for the Horticultural Research Institute Leadership Academy class of 2025 are due Feb. 9.

MONROVIA MOVES

Monrovia is expanding its New Plants program team, allowing the company to trial and test more plant material and bring more new plants into the market.

Fela Lafi is the new plant trials manager. She joins the plant hunting team and will manage plant trials at all Monrovia nurseries, work with data collection and explore new plant testing opportunities with breeders. Lafi joined Monrovia in 2022.

Georgia Clay is now the plant selections manager, focusing on new plant choices, bringing selections to market, managing intellectual property and developing breeder relationships. She will also continue her consumer outreach, participating in Monrovia's webinars and plant care videos. Clay joined Monrovia in 2019.

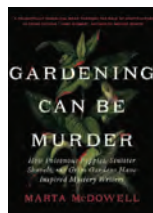
Clay and Lafi have coordinated on the selection of many of the new 2024 plant introductions and are also working with several breeders around the world to bring new plants into trial next year.



Top: Fela Lafi.
Bottom: Georgia Clay.

DEADLY BLOOMS BOOK

A new nonfiction book from Marta McDowell — a gardening writer and New York Times-bestselling author who teaches landscape history and horticulture at the New York Botanical Garden — explores the influence of gardening on mystery novels, according to the book's publisher. *Gardening Can Be Murder: How Poisonous Poppies, Sinister Shovels, and Grim Gardens Have Inspired Mystery Writers* (216 pages) — released in September by Timber Press — explores the horticultural connections to crime fiction. "With their deadly plants, razor-sharp shears, shady corners, and ready-made burial sites, gardens make an ideal scene for the perfect murder. But the outsize influence that gardens and gardening have had on the mystery genre has been underappreciated," the publisher writes.



Products and Promotions

RAILSCAPES VERTICAL GARDENING CLIPS



RailScapes Vertical Gardening Clips can help consumers create multi-tiered balcony gardens on railings.

Plant Traps: A tool-free clip to help consumers create multi-tiered balcony gardens on railings, RailScapes can suspend up to 15-pound plants at any elevation on the railing; clip onto metal, wood and vinyl railings; and can be used indoors or outdoors.

Based in Pittsburgh, the company was founded in 2021 by Deborah Holtschlag. RailScapes Vertical Gardening Clips launched in the spring of 2023 and retail for \$24.95. To learn more, visit planttraps.com.

MAGIC GARDENER BIOLOGICAL DISEASE CONTROL



Mycorrhizal Applications has launched a new broad-spectrum biological fungicide and bactericide for residential home and garden use called Magic Gardener.

Mycorrhizal Applications: A broad-spectrum biological fungicide and bactericide used to control or suppress diseases caused by plant pathogenic microbes for residential home and garden use, Magic Gardener uses a new and higher potency strain of *Bacillus amyloliquefaciens*.

Naturally found in the soil, *Bacillus* controls common consumer plant problems, including downy mildew, leaf spot, gray mold, rusts, powdery mildew and more.

(continued next page)

A large, black, multi-tiered windchime hanging from a metal ring. The background is a scenic view of a mountain valley with a river winding through it.

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(continued from pg. 7)

Magic Gardener can be used on a variety of home garden and residential plants, such as ornamentals, fruits, vegetables, herbs and turf.

Magic Gardener is also listed with the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI), an international nonprofit organization that determines which products can be used in organic production under the USDA National Organic Program. With one in three respondents to the National Gardening Survey reporting that they choose to buy mostly or all organic products, an OMRI listing is a top selling point for many customers.

Magic Gardener is made in the USA, has a two-year shelf life and features vibrant packaging. Customers will find Magic Gardener easy to use, with a clear label and tips for success.

Magic Gardener is sold in 4-ounce, easily stackable containers and complements Mycorrhizal Applications' other retail-ready products, such as Pyganic, DeBug and Actinovate. To learn how to obtain Magic Gardener or other retail products for garden centers, reach out to your local Mycorrhizal Applications sales representative.

PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEBRUARY:

From the National Garden Bureau, check out these upcoming holidays and day-of recognitions in February for promotional opportunities to advertise in your garden center.

First Friday: National Wear Red Day

2: Groundhog Day

3: Feed the Birds Day

5: Western Monarch Day

14: Valentine's Day

17: National Cabbage Day/Random Acts of Kindness Day

19: Presidents' Day

20: Cherry Pie Day (If you sell cherry trees, make that known and offer suggestions on the best time to plant a cherry tree for your area.)

22: Cook a Sweet Potato Day (Conduct a class or write a blog on how to grow sweet potatoes, with suggested recipes.)

27: National Strawberry Day (Promote your strawberry plants or seeds.)

28: Floral Design Day (Promote cut flower plants for the garden.)

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE:

California Spring Trials previews

It's that time of year again. We will be offering you a visual guide to stand-out plants in California before the Spring Trials kick off.



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BY C.L. FORNARI

C.L. Fornari is a speaker, writer and radio/podcast host who has worked at Hyannis Country Garden, an IGC on Cape Cod, for more than 20 years. She has her audiences convinced that C.L. stands for “Compost Lover.” Learn more at [GardenLady.com](https://www.GardenLady.com)



During staff trainings, make sure to include the little things, like watering essentials and customer FAQs.

Essential Staff Training: It's the Little Things

FOR MANY IGCS, January is the quietest time of year, making it ideal for staff training. Whether your store closes for such instruction over an entire day, or whether you take an hour or two each morning over the course of a week, tackling issues now will make for smoother operations in the spring.

Typical staff training days usually cover

the big topics, such as customer service, sales, communication skills and store policies for employees. Conflict resolution, changes in management or new employee introductions are usually included. Recent hires and long-term staff also benefit from reminders about safety, dress codes or personal cellphone use. But beyond such basics, there is a host of small items

to discuss, and these can make the spring rush flow much more smoothly.

Where's the...?

Some years ago, we had an employee meeting at my IGC, and once the general manager's talk was done, the staff was encouraged to make suggestions. One of the younger members spoke up. “You know,”

he began. “I waste a lot of time every day just looking for the broom and dustpan. Couldn’t we have one place where these are always kept?”

It’s such a simple thing, right? Yet everyone had gotten into the habit of using the sweeping tools and then tucking them in a corner near where they were working, instead of returning these to a central location. Quickly stashing the broom nearby might be expedient for the person who had finished sweeping, but this ended up causing all the other employees to waste time trying to find where the tools had been tucked away.

Locating pricing guns is another time sink. January is the time when these should be located, cleaned and stationed where your staff can find them quickly. Teach new hires how to load these with stickers, and go over what products get individually priced.

Ask your employees what they spend time looking for, and develop central locations for the storage of such items. Signage in those areas, such as “Return Brooms Here” or “Pricing Gun Station” can serve as reminders to experienced staff and information for new hires.

Watering woes

Most IGC employees spend a great deal of time in the company of hoses and watering wands. Experienced staff are well aware of how to keep the stock well hydrated, but new employees need to be trained in all watering essentials. A staff instruction day should include letting your team feel the difference in weight between a well-watered pot and another that is dry. Demonstrate how to water some plants by sneaking the wand under the foliage, instead of showering the water over the top.

Employees who are watering plants may frequently get pulled away from that task by a customer who needs assistance. Show those who are new to the store how to lay the watering wand down gently, marking where you left off and how to scooch the hose out of the aisle so that it’s not a tripping hazard. If there are areas that tend to flood when plants are watered, demonstrate how to mark these with orange safety cones or wet floor signs. Never assume that these



Experienced staff know how to keep the stock well hydrated, but new employees need to be trained.

small actions are obvious or automatic to new staff members.

Watering practices for dry perennials or small shrubs in hot weather aren’t always evident either. Since dry soil shrinks away from the sides of the pots, any fast watering will run down that gap and out the drainage holes before the root ball is well hydrated. New staff members will need to be shown how to water such containers once, and then go back and water again once the soil starts to swell. You might want to have a few dry pots on hand, so you can show that giving the plants “a lick and a promise” doesn’t saturate the entire root ball.

Does your store have a standard practice for dealing with the hose after watering is finished? Is there a way that you want hoses to be coiled or stored? Demonstrate or show photos of best and worst practices for watering equipment.

Since water is a precious resource, a January training session is also a good time to remind your staff how to conserve water. Who should be promptly notified when a leaky hose or faucet is noticed? Remind your people that if they are walking away from a hose for more than a few minutes, the water should be turned off at the spigot. A hose left under pressure can burst, wasting water as well as the time to

make repairs. “Righty tightly, lefty loosey” remains a good way for some employees to remember how to turn the handle.

Customer FAQs

Prepare the answers to your customers’ frequently asked questions, and make sure every member of your staff knows how to answer these. From “Do you have a rest-room?” and “What’s the Wi-Fi password?” to “What should I use to fertilize my rhododendrons?” there are queries we all hear repeatedly. Winter training days are the time to be sure that all of your employees are on the same page with their answers.

Record or print your training

While you may be able to get most of your staff to a winter training event, there will always be new hires in the spring. Write down these small training tips so that seasonal employees can be given a handout about where standard equipment is stored, how plants are routinely watered, customer FAQs and other information. You might consider a video recording of some of your training so that new staff members can watch during their orientation process.

Once the customers and deliveries start rolling in come spring, the little things can become the big things. Prepare for them now. ⁸⁶



BY KEN LAIN

Ken Lain is president of Watters Garden Center in Prescott, Arizona. wattersgardencenter.com



Cause marketing involves partnering with an organization to raise money and awareness of a community need.

Community Connections

How cause marketing helped a \$4 million Arizona garden center increase sales, employee morale and community influence.

AS A SMALL BUSINESS OWNER, giving back to the community is essential. The needs of nonprofits overwhelm our garden center advertising and donation budgets. Cause marketing is fantastic at supporting our community while promoting the gar-

den center — a win-win for everyone. In a cause marketing campaign, we partner with an organization to raise money and awareness of a community need.

The partnership creates goodwill for the company that is priceless. It allows us to compete head-to-head with box store outlets that deploy much larger advertising budgets. Cause marketing increases our brand strength, customer base and employee relationships.

We use several techniques. Here are the ideas that work.

Donate a percentage of sales

Prescott, Arizona, lost 19 firefighters in a horrible wildfire accident, the 2013 Yarnell Hill Fire. The town still grieves. We donated the profits from Firefighter Roses sold that year to support our community. It created tremendous goodwill for the garden center, helped our staff process the loss better and showed our community we were with them — a win-win-win for everyone.

Get involved in a celebrity event

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Ari-

PHOTO © VIKTORIA / ADOBESTOCK



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zona hosted the seventh annual “Dancing For The Stars” fundraiser in August 2023. Community leaders volunteer to use their influence to raise money for the clubs and dance in the largest auditorium in town. Professional dancers partner with community leaders for a star-studded performance by local talent. The event raised a total of \$469,000, with nine couples competing in a series of dances over two nights of dancing. The goodwill created by the event is incalculable; the clubs raised enough money to fund more than 60% of their annual budget. Customers are excited to see “their” garden center represented on stage. It’s a win-win-win for everyone.

Host an event

In September, the garden center partners with the Prescott Frontier Rotary Club to host an after-hour garden party, “Grapes

4 Good.” The Rotary Club sells \$80 tickets to the event and offers VIP parking for event sponsors and silent auction items for an animated live auction. Three hundred people attended the event and raised \$124,000 for local school programs. Rotary members did most of the work, with promotional, advertising and ticket sales help from the garden center. Because we host the event, we receive the goodwill created by all the positivity in the community. It’s a win-win-win for the garden center, the Rotary Club and the nonprofits the funds support.

Offer a matching gift

We encourage customers to donate to a nonprofit at the register, and the garden center matches their donations more significantly. We created a donation SKU in our POS system that names the nonprofit on



Carie Hughes, owner of Cherry Creek Ranch Event Center, and Ken Lain, president of Watters Garden Center, participated in the seventh annual “Dancing For The Stars” fundraiser for The Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Arizona in August 2023.

their Watters Garden Center receipt. Our customers feel good about “their” garden center, and the nonprofit receives a sizable gift. It’s a win-win-win for the garden center, our customers and the nonprofit.

PHOTO © KEN LAIN

A large photograph of a woman with dark hair tied in a bun, wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark apron. She is looking down at a tablet computer she is holding in her hands. The background is a garden center with many potted plants, including pink and red flowers.

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“CAUSE MARKETING INCREASES OUR BRAND STRENGTH, CUSTOMER BASE AND EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS.”

Benefits of cause marketing

Enhanced reputation is the key benefit. Watters Garden Center is a socially responsible company. Customers trust us and take ownership of “their” garden center. They are proud to talk about us to friends and family.

We also see improved employee mo-

rale. When employees feel part of something big in the community, they are more engaged with customers, their community and work.

Of course, there is also increased brand awareness. By partnering with a nonprofit, our brand is associated with a cause

customers care about, generating positive feelings about “their” garden center.

All of it leads to increased sales. Customers see our commitment to giving back and shop more often with us.

Finally, and most importantly, our community is better. We give more than money. When Watters Garden Center gets involved in a community project, the company provides energy, talent, advertising acumen, company goodwill and a hefty donation, making our community a better place to live.

Cause marketing elevates our company, encourages customers to get involved in the community and improves a nonprofit's ability to make a difference. There are many different ways to do cause marketing. Find one that matches your company's personality and make a difference. It's truly a win-win-win for everyone. ⁸⁶

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By Patrick Alan Coleman

Easy as X, Y, Z

Big differences in generational garden spending and goals should drive IGCs in 2024.

Younger gardeners are planning to spend more time and money on their gardens in 2024 than older gardeners. That's the big message of Axiom Marketing's 2024 Gardening Outlook Survey. And it's a message that IGC owners should internalize — because recognizing generational needs and desires can help focus marketing and product selection to drive business goals.

While all gardeners surveyed in the annual report plan to plant more and expand their gardens in 2024, the percentages are highest among Gen Y, a.k.a. millennials, (76.2%) and Gen Z (71.2%). In general, Gen Y and Gen Z represent a cohort between the ages of 11 and 42 years old. That's an enormous population that represents those just starting out in Gen Z and those who are establishing their careers and home lives in Gen Y.

Establishing proverbial roots in communities might just be the key to understanding the reason behind Gen Y's increased garden spending, according to Axiom founder and CEO Mike Reiber. "We asked ourselves, well, why is Gen Y doing that? And I think a big part of that, they're in the peak of their earning years, and they can afford to spend more."

Reiber also hypothesizes that high interest rates might be inspiring the early middle-aged homeowners to stay in their homes, further inspiring them to invest more in gardens they intend to be active in for the long term.

This hypothesis is strengthened by respondents from older generations (Gen Y and Gen X) who said that if they weren't spending on their garden, they would be spending on home improvement. The assumption is that staying put would make people want to



PHOTO © ADOBE FREELY

invest more in their immediate environment. There's additional corroboration in the survey, with 58% of all respondents reporting their main gardening project will be increasing the curb appeal of their home.

The desire to improve homes may also influence where gardeners are buying plants. According to the survey, respondents listed big box home improvement stores like Home Depot and Lowe's as their primary source for plants and tools. IGCs were listed fourth behind Walmart, which was third.

Those numbers aren't ideal for IGCs, but they also don't tell the entire story, according to Reiber. More than 56% of respondents reported visiting IGCs the same number of times in 2023 compared to 2022. An additional 20% said they increased their visits to IGCs in 2023. "That's pretty good, given the purchase numbers," Reiber notes.

He also points out one area IGCs outpace their giant retail competitors. When asked where they go to check out new plant varieties, tools and information, IGCs come out on top — ahead of big box home improvement stores. When asked why a visit to an IGC was important, respondents noted more plant choice and new plant varieties as their top reasons for visiting.

Reiber says the Gardening Outlook Survey may show IGCs there are opportunities to lean into home improvement products, ideas and messaging, particularly when it comes to curb appeal. "I think the play is to take a page out of what Lowe's and Home Depot do," he says. "Enable weekend warrior projects. But work those projects towards plants."

For instance, Reiber imagines an IGC can offer a selection of paint to change the color of a front door, with plant recommendations that complement the color and style. He also suggests leaning into custom planters that boost curb appeal or classes that help home gardeners make planters themselves.

With younger IGC customers eager to spend money on their homes and gardens, garden centers can and should consider the fact that they're seen as sources of inspiration and information. They have the ability and the knowledge to help younger homeowners improve their spaces in the coming year and find success.

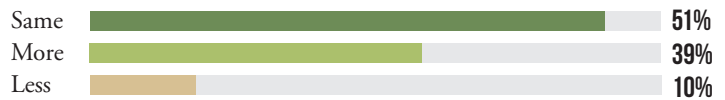
"It's all about the ideas," Reiber says. "We know garden centers are good at ideas. But have they linked their ideas to what people might think of as home improvement? I don't believe they have, from my personal experience."

The full 2024 Gardening Outlook Survey is available at axiomcom.com (click on "Resources," then "Axiom Insights Surveys," then "2024 Gardening Outlook Survey"). Read on to explore the highlights. ⁸⁰

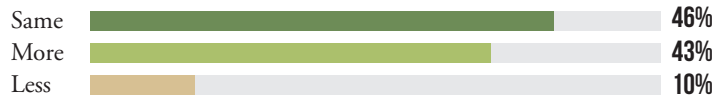
Patrick Alan Coleman is editor of Garden Center magazine. Contact him at pcoleman@gie.net.

Are you likely to spend more or less on gardening in 2024 compared to 2023?

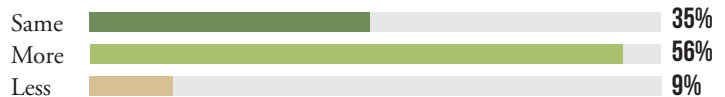
Gen X



Gen Y

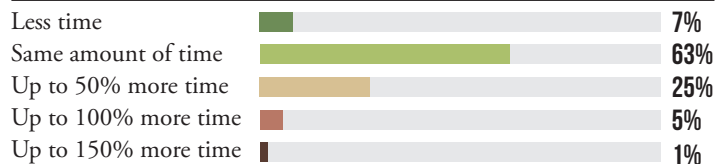


Gen Z

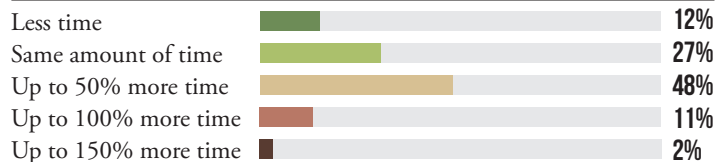


How much time did you spend gardening in 2023 compared to 2022

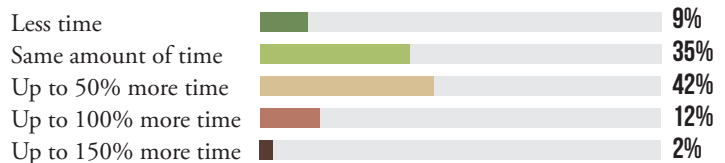
Gen X



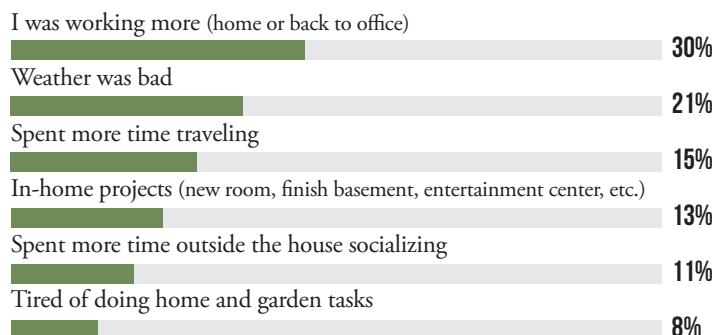
Gen Y



Gen Z



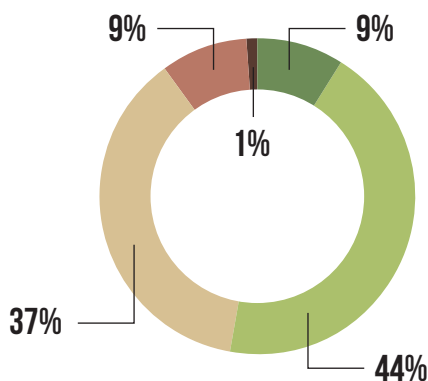
If you spent less time gardening in 2023, why?



CONSUMER INSIGHTS

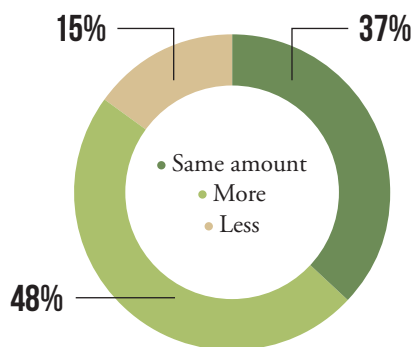
How much time did you spend gardening in 2023 compared to 2022?

- Less time
- Same amount of time
- Up to 50% more time
- Up to 100% more time
- Up to 150% more time



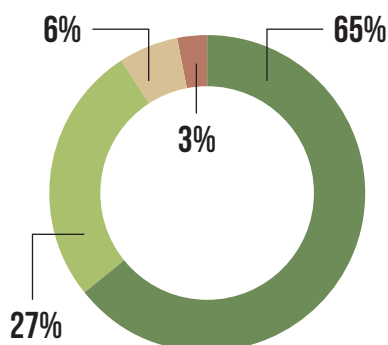
How much money did you spend on gardening this year, compared to last year?

- Same amount
- More
- Less

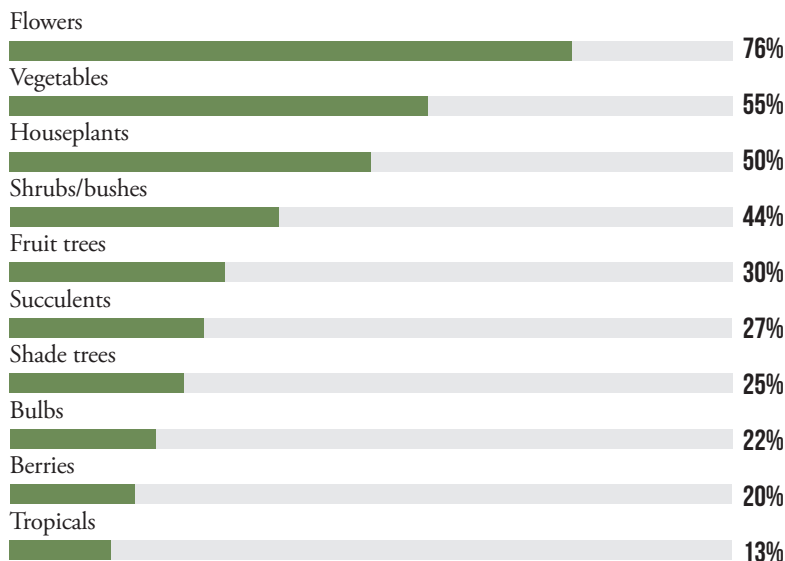


Is gardening something you plan to continue in 2024?

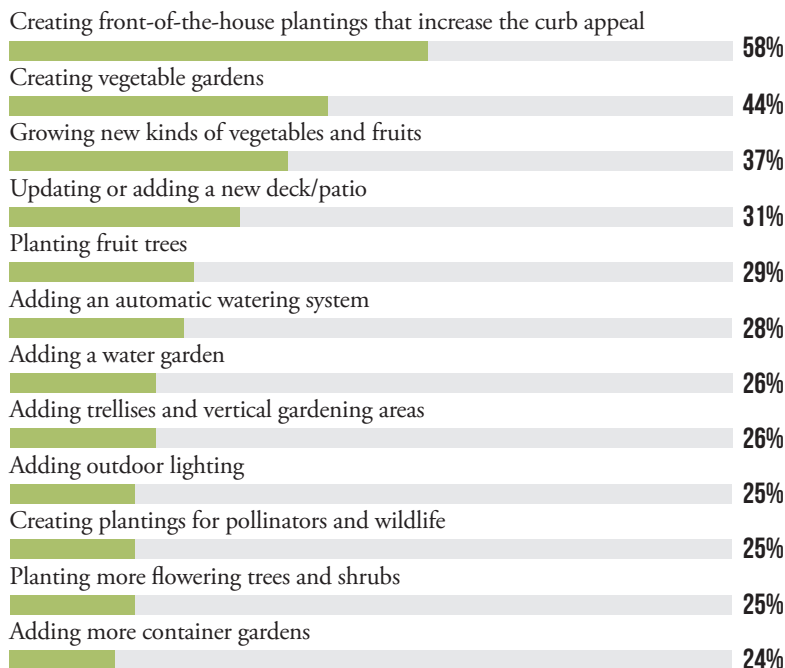
- Yes, and I will plant more and expand my garden
- Yes, but I will plant the same amount
- Yes, but I will plant less
- No



What types of plants do you grow? (Check all that apply.)



What is the most important gardening project that you hope to accomplish in 2024?

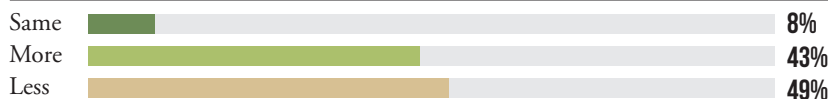


What type of garden do you have?

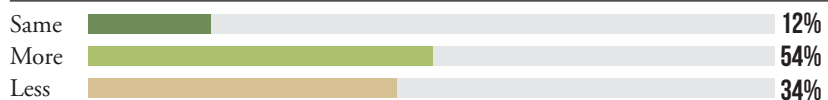


How much time do you expect to spend gardening in 2024 compared to 2023?

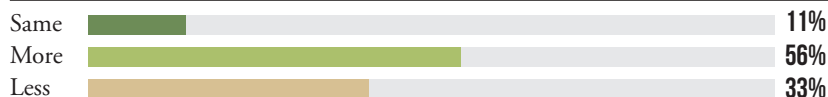
Gen X



Gen Y

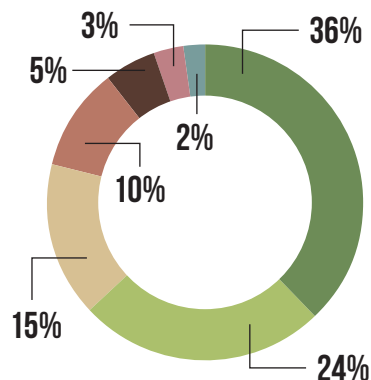


Gen Z



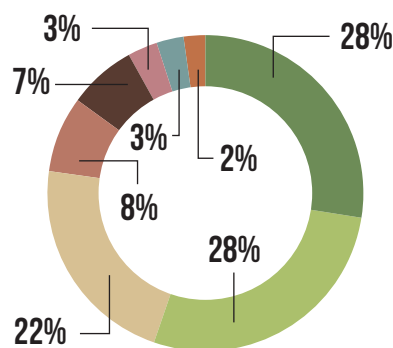
Where did you buy most of your gardening supplies (i.e., seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, equipment, etc.) in 2023?

- Home Depot
- Lowe's
- Walmart
- Local Garden Center
- Hardware store
- Farm store
- Online



What is the most important place to learn about new plants and gardening supplies?

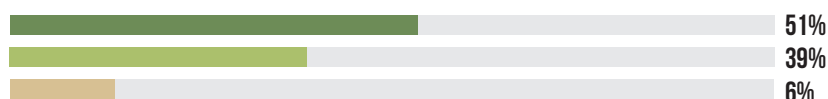
- Local garden centers
- Websites
- Social media
- TV
- Home centers (Home Depot, Lowe's)
- Print and digital magazines
- Newspapers
- Extension service



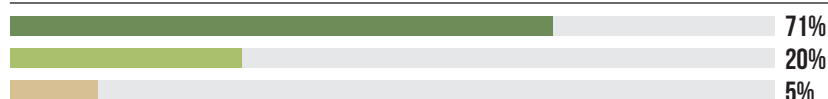
Is gardening something you plan to continue in 2024 (by generation)?

- Yes, and I will plant more and expand my garden
- Yes, but I will plant the same amount
- Yes, but I will plant less

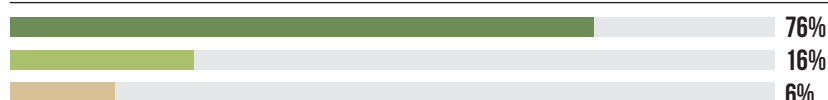
Gen X



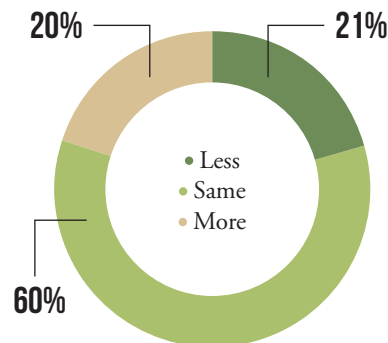
Gen Y



Gen Z

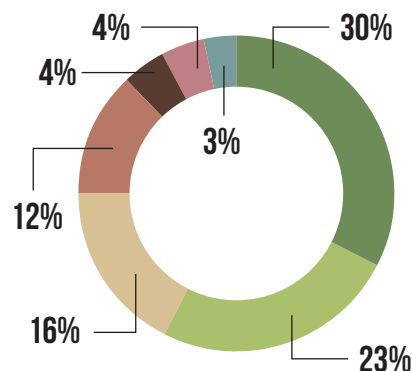


Did you visit independent garden centers more or less this year?



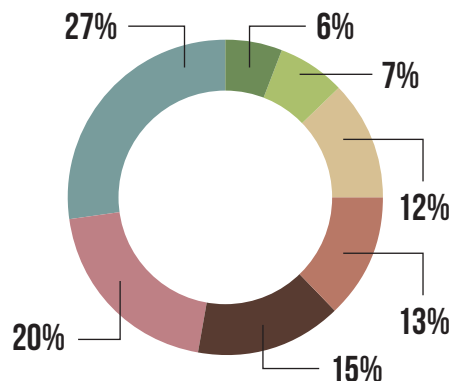
Where did you buy most of your garden plants in 2023?

- Home Depot
- Lowe's
- Walmart
- Local Garden Center
- Hardware store
- Farm store
- Online



When you visit local garden centers, what do you need most?

- Expert advice on tough problems
- Special products that I can't buy at other retailers
- Help choosing the right plant for my garden
- One-stop shopping
- New ideas for my garden or outdoor living projects
- New plant varieties
- More plant choices



STOP AND GO

The economy may slow early in 2024 before accelerating into 2025.

By Patrick Alan Coleman

Data from *Garden Center* magazine's 2023 State of the Industry Report reveal that well over 80% of participating independent garden centers turned a profit in 2022 and expected the same for 2023. Respondents attributed their success to several factors, including strong 2023 spring sales and an increasing customer base. Still, reporting IGCs were also battling challenges including staffing and inflation. And those challenges are likely to persist, according to Curtis Dubai, chief economist in the Economic Policy Division at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"Overall, I think the economy is not going to be as strong in 2024 as it had been in 2023," Dubai says. "I think slowing at the end of 2023 will extend into 2024."

Hitting limits

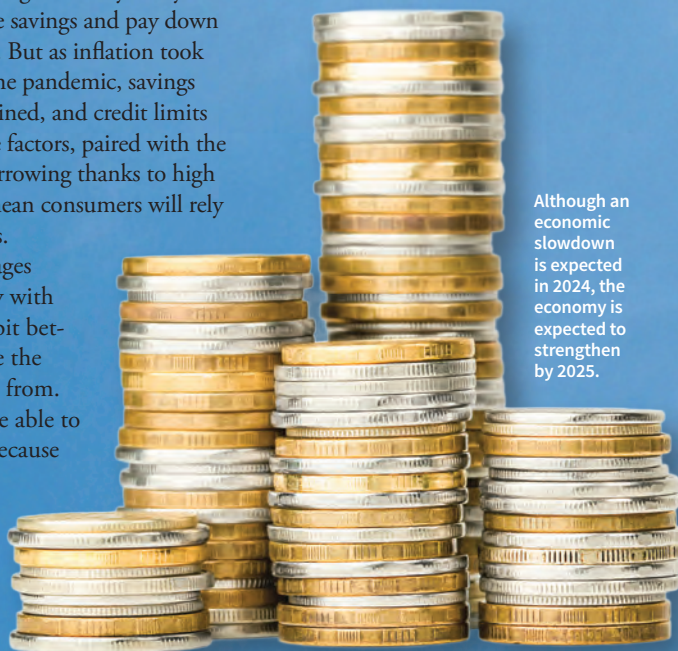
While inflation appeared to be easing at the end of 2023, as national price hikes eased, Dubai notes that the effect of the inflationary wallop consumers took in 2023 will linger well into 2024. That's due to consumer cash resources dwindling

despite solid wages.

"Savings have been down, and credit card balances have been up," Dubai says. "That means consumers have to go to other areas for supplement spending."

Consumers had a good run in the COVID era, according to Dubai. They were able to increase savings and pay down credit card balances. But as inflation took hold at the end of the pandemic, savings were once again drained, and credit limits were reached. Those factors, paired with the increased cost of borrowing thanks to high interest rates, will mean consumers will rely more on their wages.

"Income and wages have grown roughly with inflation, maybe a bit better. But that's where the weakness will come from. Consumers won't be able to keep up anymore because they've run out of other ways to supplement their spending," Dubai says.



Although an economic slowdown is expected in 2024, the economy is expected to strengthen by 2025.



SLOWDOWN AHEAD

Steady traffic for IGCs?

All consumer-related businesses will likely be affected by an economic slowdown, but those connected to home improvement may prove to be a bit more resilient, according to Dubai. “The housing market is going to remain quite strong,” he says. “In fact, it’s rebounded already.”

A robust housing market means that homeowners will want to continue improving their homes. According to the National Association of REALTORS Research Group’s 2023 Remodeling Impact Report: Outdoor Features, consumers could see a 104% cost recovery on landscape maintenance projects that include “pruning of shrubs and planting of approximately 60 perennials or annuals.” Of those homeowners that completed a landscape maintenance project, 27% were inspired to do so because it was “time for a change.” And a full 61% reported having a greater desire to be home after completing the project.

“Home remodeling is going to fall off due to the cost of borrowing,” Dubai says. “But people will want to continue improving their homes.”

With remodeling costs remaining high, outdoor projects may be a more accessible way to spruce up the looks of a house. That could be a boon in an economy experiencing challenges.

Anticipating acceleration

Dubai says that while the slowdown will linger through 2024, business owners should be prepared for a brighter future. “The economy will improve,” he says. “So be prepared for the slowdown, but be ready to take advantage of a strong economy at the end of 2024 into 2025.”

The trick will be to keep calm and thoughtful through the spring and into summer. Dubai recommends that business owners keep a close eye on their outlays. He also points out that staffing challenges will continue. It will be important to consider ways to keep employees on staff and avoid the cost and time required to hire and train new employees. “So, keep them happy. Keep them there. Keep them inside the fold,” he says.

With some good planning, steady nerves and a good housing market, IGCs should be able to safely navigate the stop and go of 2024. ⁸⁶

Patrick Alan Coleman is editor of Garden Center magazine. Contact him at pcoleman@gie.net.

Dramm

All water Wands are Not Created Equally

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Choosing the right water wand to stock in your store can be challenging. Many factors make good watering tools: The quality of construction, the performance of the spray patterns, the valve configuration and consumer appeal are all critical points to consider. The tools you use in your store and greenhouse might be the quality your customer would appreciate.

Quality of construction matters. Consumers drop, drag and pull hose end items frequently. They tend to pull the wand with the hose attached, causing too much force to the hose and wand connection. Weak materials will leak and break from the repeated pulling. Look for metal threads and strong hose and wand connections.

The nozzle is another high-impact tool that must withstand dropping and dragging. Look for a nozzle made with durable plastic or metal, especially

metal on the head, end and handle, where the natural wear points are. Consider the water quality of your area. Some materials will have issues with hard water. Ball-type valves tend to last longer than plunger (lever)-type valves. A high-quality water wand will give customers years of service even under the harshest conditions.

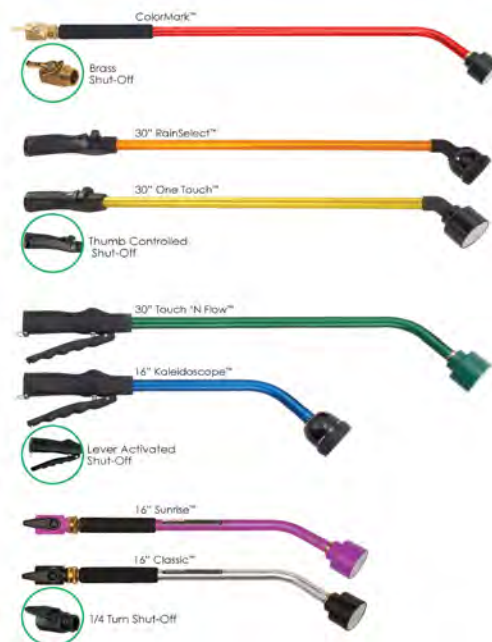
The performance of the spray pattern is an essential feature that is often overlooked. Most consumers purchase a watering product without seeing how the water comes out of the nozzle. For watering plants, the volume of water is important. The soil should be thoroughly soaked when watering plant material. The plant roots follow the water down into the soil. The deeper the roots, the healthier and more drought-resistant the plants become. The force of the water coming out of the nozzle is equally

valuable. The water should come out in a gentle stream, simulating rain, not damaging plants or washing away the soil. Multi-pattern heads can also provide other useful patterns for misting seedlings and young plants.

There are three types of valve configurations: thumb control, lever and quarter turn. Thumb control is cur-

rently the most popular due to its ease of use. By simply moving a control with your thumb, you can have precise control of the water flowing out of the nozzle. It can be a game changer for a customer with hand issues or who waters frequently. The lever valve is spring-loaded to the off position. It can be a water-saving feature for customers watering many containers and going from pot to pot, turning the water on for each pot and turning it off between pots. Some water districts require this feature to prevent a nozzle from spraying water when dropped or left unattended. The quarter turn valve is the most straightforward. The valve handle is turned with one hand while holding the wand with the other.

Choose products for each type of customer you will have in your store. A good, better, best strategy lets customers quickly and effectively compare value and price. As an independent retailer, your customers' value and price expectations differ from shopping at a box store. They will seek better-quality tools that give them exceptional value and top performance. Do not be afraid to stock the best quality. Your customers are looking for it. Stocking high-quality products will translate to successful sales with your hose accessory offerings.



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WEATHERING THE SPRING

A strong El Niño year may drive earlier planting and sales demand for northern regions of North America.

By Patrick Alan Coleman

Gardens literally live or die by the weather. But gardeners, ever hopeful, cultivate regardless of how wet, dry, hot or cold it might be.

In the best circumstances, the plants they purchase align with the climate and thrive. In the worst circumstances, gardeners make poor choices, plants die and garden centers receive complaints or returns. That makes it crucial for IGCs to understand the weather outlook to offer gardeners the best advice and provide the most appropriate plants.

According to Joe Woznicki, a meteorologist and energy and agricultural weather consultant for the Commodity Weather Group, the advice — and plants — for 2024 will be ruled by one climate phenomenon: El Niño.

“We are in a pretty strong El Niño situation,” he says. “It’s within the top five events here of the last 30 to 50 years or so.”

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), El Niño is a phenomenon marked by an unusual increase in water temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. The event was marked by South American fishermen for centuries, who dubbed it El Niño, a term for baby Jesus, due to its propensity to show up around Christmastime during affected years.

Due to the ocean’s inextricable link with atmospheric conditions, El Niño can have far reaching effects on weather patterns across the United States and Canada. That means gardeners may be caught off-guard or motivated by weather conditions unfamiliar in typical weather years.

Woznicki notes that the El Niño climate shifts are already in play. “For winter, that generally means a pretty warm pattern across the northern U.S. And then the southern half of the country is

A photograph of a man and a woman at a conference. The man, on the left, has curly hair and a beard, wearing a dark shirt with a green strap over his shoulder. He is holding a white coffee cup. The woman, on the right, has long blonde hair and wears glasses and a beige sweater. She is smiling and holding a red coffee cup and a small plate of food. She has a name tag that says "gardencenter conference Kelly Duevel". The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and equipment.

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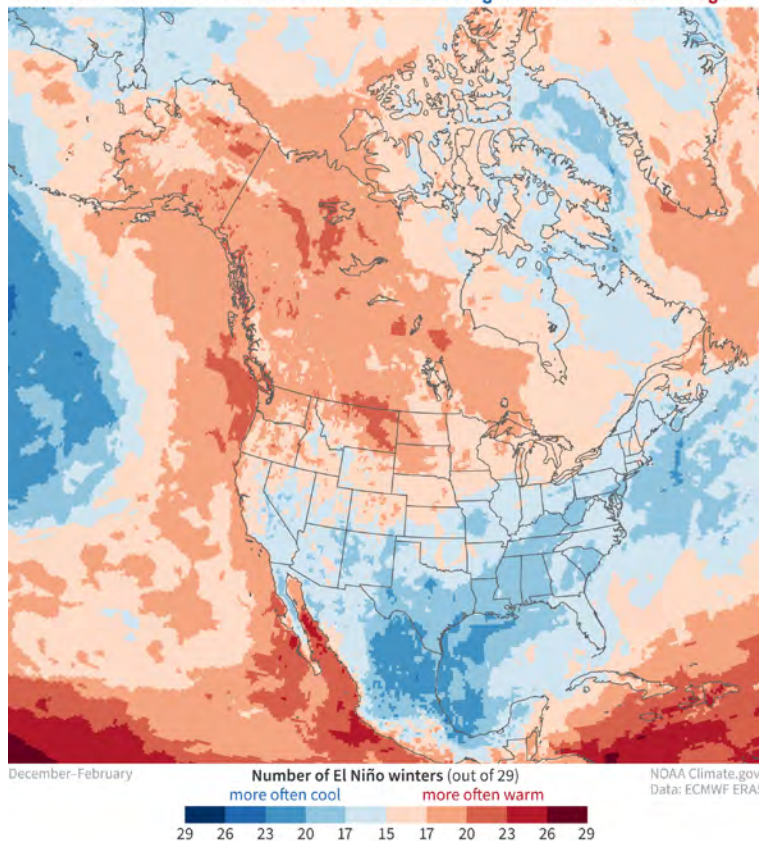
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How often have El Niño winters been cooler than average vs. warmer than average?



“IT’S GOING TO BE TOUGH WITH THE CLIMATE SITUATION THAT WE HAVE TO GET A COOLER THAN NORMAL SUMMER ANYMORE, JUST IN GENERAL.”

-JOE WOZNICKI

cooler to colder and stormier,” he says.

That might not seem relevant for gardeners in the northern United States who are not currently growing outdoors. But Woznicki notes that the patterns will linger into early 2024.

“El Niño generally peaks in November and December and then starts to weaken. But El Niño atmospheric feedback persists through spring,” he says. “So, we still expect that warm pattern across the northern tier of the country and a stormier weather pattern with wetter and cooler conditions across the southern portions of the country from March through May.”

The pattern means that spring in the northern regions of the U.S. into the southern regions of Canada will see planting conditions that look more enticing to gardeners. With warmer temperatures and drier soil, they may be inspired to come into their local garden centers to kick off spring sales earlier than in typical years.

Northern garden centers may also want to consider the hardiness of plant choices.

“In your early planting, you’d typically want those plants that are less susceptible to a late frost,” Woznicki says. “But I don’t think a late frost situation is going to be as big of an issue this year, especially across the north.”

But it will not likely be a delightful spring picture for all gardeners. Those in the southern portion of the U.S. may see wetter than normal conditions. That could mean water-logged soil from California to the Southeast.

As El Niño subsides past spring, Woznicki encourages IGC owners to keep their eye on El Niño’s opposite: La Niña. This phenomenon is characterized by unusually cool ocean temperatures in the Pacific. That can mean a very dry, hot summer.

“To get the really hot, really dry situation, you really need that transition towards a faster La Niña in the summer,” Woznicki says. “Some of the models are

trending that direction right now, but the consensus is still pretty neutral.”

Still, the possibility of a La Niña summer is something for IGCs to keep an eye on as the spring develops. Either way, the least likely scenario will be a cooler than normal summer, explains Woznicki. “It’s going to be tough with the climate situation that we have to get a cooler than normal summer anymore, just in general,” he says.

It all adds up to a need for IGCs to be prepared to start spring sales early and talk with garden center consumers about watering and water management to keep their gardens thriving — and to keep complaints about dying plants to a minimum — because while you can’t control the weather, you can always educate your customers on how to deal with it. ⁸⁶

Patrick Alan Coleman is editor of Garden Center magazine. Contact him at pcoleman@gie.net.

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BASIC WEED CONTROL
3' x 50' (150 SQ FT) **5**

No Weeds. No Chemicals.

- Eliminates Chemical Sprays
- Helps Soil Conserve Water
- Lets Air, Water and Nutrients Pass Through

4 Simple Steps

1. **CLEAR & RAKE**
Remove weeds and clear ground surface.
2. **GET A PLACE**
Roll out Weed-Barrier, making sure it is flat and in full contact with the ground.
3. **SECURE & SEED**
Secure with 2x4s or 2x6s and plant.
4. **COVER & CARE**
Cover with soil, mulch or your choice of landscape fabric.

Applications: LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS, BARRIERS

DeWitt Basic Weed Control



DeWitt Weed-Barrier
DOWN TO EARTH PROTECTION
STANDARD WEED CONTROL
3' x 50' (150 SQ FT) **15**

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- Helps Soil Conserve Water
- Lets Air, Water and Nutrients Pass Through

4 Simple Steps

1. **CLEAR & RAKE**
Remove weeds and clear ground surface.
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Cover with soil, mulch or your choice of landscape fabric.

Applications: LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS, BARRIERS

DeWitt Standard Weed Control



DeWitt Weed-Barrier
DOWN TO EARTH PROTECTION
PREMIUM WEED CONTROL
3' x 50' (150 SQ FT) **20**

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- Eliminates Chemical Sprays
- Helps Soil Conserve Water
- Lets Air, Water and Nutrients Pass Through

4 Simple Steps

1. **CLEAR & RAKE**
Remove weeds and clear ground surface.
2. **GET A PLACE**
Roll out Weed-Barrier, making sure it is flat and in full contact with the ground.
3. **SECURE & SEED**
Secure with 2x4s or 2x6s and plant.
4. **COVER & CARE**
Cover with soil, mulch or your choice of landscape fabric.

Applications: LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS, BARRIERS, EROSION CONTROL

DeWitt Premium Weed Control



DeWitt Weed-Barrier
DOWN TO EARTH PROTECTION
PREMIUM PLUS WEED CONTROL
3' x 50' (150 SQ FT) **25**

No Weeds. No Chemicals.

- Resists Tears & Puncturing
- Eliminates Chemical Sprays
- Helps Soil Conserve Water
- Lets Air, Water and Nutrients Pass Through

4 Simple Steps

1. **CLEAR & RAKE**
Remove weeds and clear ground surface.
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3. **SECURE & SEED**
Secure with 2x4s or 2x6s and plant.
4. **COVER & CARE**
Cover with soil, mulch or your choice of landscape fabric.

Applications: LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS, BARRIERS, EROSION CONTROL

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Grey



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No Weeds. No Chemicals.

- Resists Tears & Puncturing
- Eliminates Chemical Sprays
- Helps Soil Conserve Water
- Lets Air, Water and Nutrients Pass Through

4 Simple Steps

1. **CLEAR & RAKE**
Remove weeds and clear ground surface.
2. **GET A PLACE**
Roll out Weed-Barrier, making sure it is flat and in full contact with the ground.
3. **SECURE & SEED**
Secure with 2x4s or 2x6s and plant.
4. **COVER & CARE**
Cover with soil, mulch or your choice of landscape fabric.

Applications: LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS, BARRIERS, EROSION CONTROL

DeWitt Professional Weed Control



DeWitt Weed-Barrier
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PROFESSIONAL WEED CONTROL
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No Weeds. No Chemicals.

- Resists Tears & Puncturing
- Eliminates Chemical Sprays
- Helps Soil Conserve Water
- Lets Air, Water and Nutrients Pass Through

4 Simple Steps

1. **CLEAR & RAKE**
Remove weeds and clear ground surface.
2. **GET A PLACE**
Roll out Weed-Barrier, making sure it is flat and in full contact with the ground.
3. **SECURE & SEED**
Secure with 2x4s or 2x6s and plant.
4. **COVER & CARE**
Cover with soil, mulch or your choice of landscape fabric.

Applications: LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS, BARRIERS, EROSION CONTROL

DeWitt Professional Weed Control
Earthtone



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- Resists Tears & Puncturing
- Eliminates Chemical Sprays
- Helps Soil Conserve Water
- Lets Air, Water and Nutrients Pass Through

4 Simple Steps

1. **CLEAR & RAKE**
Remove weeds and clear ground surface.
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Cover with soil, mulch or your choice of landscape fabric.

Applications: LANDSCAPE PLANTINGS, BARRIERS, EROSION CONTROL

DeWitt Professional Max Weed Control



Wind River Chimes

Wind Chimes: A Profit Center for Your IGC

Wind chimes are a profitable asset for your store. Not only do people buy them for themselves, but also as gifts for others, proving their lasting value as a display in your store. While many have resumed their pre-COVID pastimes, people continue to enjoy the outdoor living spaces they developed throughout the pandemic. Wind chimes add comforting harmonies to these spaces at a time when everyone needs a moment to relax.

We have found that wind chime lovers enjoy collecting a variety of chimes. People who love wind chimes tend to own more than one chime — they can't stop at just one! Our wind chimes are sold in a variety of sizes, colors and styles that can suit any mood, season or personal taste. Your customers will find that there are plenty of options to choose from to expand their ever-growing wind chime collection.

Because these customers love wind chimes, they will also look to them as a gift idea for holidays and special occasions. Our wind chimes come in a wide range of sizes and price points. They can be as simple as a small hostess gift, or as grand as a golden anniversary gift for someone special.

Wind chimes are especially popular in

the spring months, as young and old alike head outdoors to garden, play and enjoy their green spaces. Our chimes are durable and built to withstand all types of weather, so wherever you live, these chimes will make great additions to your outdoor living space.

To maximize your wind chime sales, make sure that:

- The wind chimes are displayed where customers can ring them and hear them. Remember: SOUND sells chimes!
- Make sure that your chime display is well lit, so that customers can see the individual colors, style and craftsmanship of each piece.
- If your location permits, display a chime outside your entrance so customers can hear them in action as they walk in.
- Include at least one large wind chime in your display as a focal point. Even if shoppers do not buy it first, it will help sell the smaller chimes around it.
- Choose a display that includes shelves for boxed chimes as well as display chimes (see photo). These fixtures allow customers to choose their favorite windchime from the display and then select the boxed chime from the shelf, ready for checkout.



The display makes it easier for you to restock and minimizes unnecessary handling.

Wind River® has been handcrafting wind chimes in Virginia since 1986. Our wind chimes are 100% U.S.A.-sourced and U.S.A.-made. We get our raw materials and components from U.S. companies so that, from start to finish, our chimes are entirely made in the U.S.A.

Wind River® chimes are engineered for unmatched sound quality. They are assembled with care and individually hand-tuned for superior sound. We look forward to bringing the harmonies of our chimes to your store!

For more information, visit windriverchimes.com.

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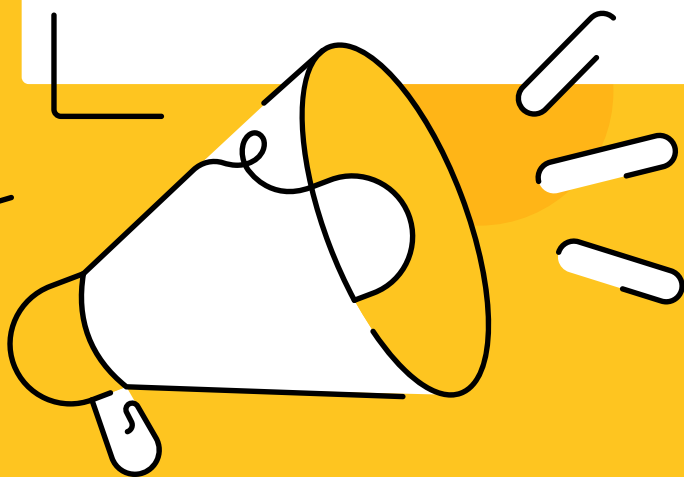


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By Emily Mills

TIPS FROM THE TOP

Our Top 100 IGCs offer their best advice for surviving — and thriving — through spring.



The spring season may still be a few months away, but the key to a profitable spring lays in the slow winter months.

It's all about preparation and communication.

We talked to some of *Garden Center* magazine's 2023 Top 100 Independent Garden Centers to get their top tips for surviving — and thriving — through spring.

It's the little things

Ryan Glover is operations manager at Glover Nursery in West Jordan, Utah, outside Salt Lake City (#39 on the Top 100 list).

The business prepares for spring from November through February, focusing on “clearing the bottlenecks and hang-ups that really cause a lot of the stress in the springtime for us,” he says — things like pre-pricing and equipment maintenance.

“Just trying to stay ahead of it as much as possible has really helped

us out a lot rather than being so reactionary to things,” he adds.

That means completing projects that may seem small but offer big rewards, like paving pathways to help the staff that's using more forklifts and golf carts than in the past.

Another example: The IGC previously only had one entrance for trucks to make deliveries, meaning additional trucks had to park on the street — creating additional stress for staff.

So, the team cleared a spot on its property and paved an extra 12 to 15 feet for additional trucks to pull over to the side.

“That was a massive improvement. That was just a little thing,” Glover says. “Nobody else would even really notice it, but for us, it took so much stress off everybody.”

The IGC is also being more intentional about what it sells and has even stopped selling products, even if they're profitable, if they're not driving the business. Instead, it focuses on optimizing

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BEST PRACTICES

the physical space those products once used to merchandise its most profitable, best-selling products.

Plus, the business is space-limited at its location, so “the only way to grow is to eliminate things that are not performing well,” Glover says.

“Over the years, we’ve kind of just accumulated all these different products and things that we make money on but isn’t worth the area it takes up,” he adds. “This year, we’re eliminating over half of our bulk products that we sell to make room for parking.”

Prepare your staff

East Coast Garden Center in Millsboro, Delaware, (#98 on the Top 100 list) focuses on its staff, say garden center manager Katie Short and co-owner Chris Cordrey.

The garden center has 200 employees between its garden center and landscape divisions, and it works hard to keep them busy though the winter.

“We try to keep good people over the winter, so we create winter work,” Short says. “Anything from power washing to painting to re-stoning areas in the garden center, any kind of benches that need replaced, fixed up. We’re trying to go in with a critical eye and seeing any kind of, we call it broken windows, and trying to clean those things up before the spring.”

Other winter work includes switching paths from stone to concrete to improve the customer experience and ensuring signage is prepared and looking good.

Keeping staff over the winter also helps the garden center be better prepared for the spring.

“It hurts on the payroll during the winter, but it also gives us a much better staff in the spring, and now instead of hiring when that need comes, we’re constantly hiring,” Cordrey says.

The business has a talent acquisition specialist on staff, it hosts a job fair as early as February and it’s always interviewing people.

“We’re constantly looking for people and getting good people, in advance where years ago, we might not have enough people and we’re running around,” Cordrey says. “Even if we don’t have an immediate need, we’re interviewing and having people in the pipeline in order to make sure we have the best staff possible.”

One new concept the business is exploring is pre-selling. It’s utilizing its online store more than in the past. The business is also basing more of its operations on data and trying to extend its spring season to keep customers coming in earlier and later to try to spread out the rush.

“We did a lot of things from our gut before, but we’re doing a lot more tracking of numbers: what we sold over the last years, what our budgets are for different things,” Cordrey says.

The company has also improved its training efforts, with company-wide training and selected training for



East Coast Garden Center in Delaware is using more data to prepare for the spring season.



Glover Nursery in Utah focuses on completing projects that seem small but offer big rewards.

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BEST PRACTICES



Above: Glover Nursery in Utah is eliminating more than half its bulk products to make room for parking. Left: Van Putte Gardens in Rochester, New York, reminds staff the spring pace won't last forever.

specific positions, including both in-house training and specific product training from sales representatives.

"We do a lot more pre-planning than we ever have in the past. So, we're thinking about next year way before we ever did in earlier years," Cordrey says. "Pre-planning is the word I would say over and over, and just trying not to shoot from the hip when the spring comes."

Know your weather

Sheridan Nurseries (#18 on the Top 100 list) has eight locations in Ontario, Canada: seven open year-round, and one open from April through December.

The start of the spring season is extremely weather dependent — and staff must be ready to go whenever the weather drives people to stores, says director of marketing Victoria Mulvale.

That means hiring staff early, making sure staff is trained on guest service expectations and product knowledge, deciding where product is going within stores with solid merchandising plans and transitioning benches right after Christmas so the stores are ready to receive product as soon as the weather changes.

"Where we are in Ontario, the weather could change any time from March until May. We don't know, but we have to be ready because there's pent-up anticipation around here of the seasonal shift," Mulvale says. "As soon as the weather starts turning,

people are out looking for stuff, so we need to make sure that our benches are ready. As soon as product can viably survive, we can have it on our benches and ready to sell and not be scrambling trying to set up benches on that first nice day."

Spring top-sellers include boxwood, roses and patio furniture. The business' multiple locations rely on "leaders of excellence" who coordinate efforts, from product knowledge materials and training events to merchandising and marketing. "And communication, communication, communication: lots and lots of communication to make sure that everyone is aware of what's going on, and there's no unanswered questions," Mulvale adds.

It's a family

Kyle Van Putte, CEO and president of Van Putte Gardens (#84 on the Top 100 list) in Rochester, New York, hates playing catch-up.

"I think the first thing that comes to mind would be preparedness, and schedule, and utilizing right now, December and January, to set yourself up for a successful spring," he says. "You can kind of anticipate what's going to happen that first week of May, or that fourth week of May, or the third week of June."

A big part of surviving the spring season is reminding his staff that they're a family — and everyone loves a family meal, with the business hosting "pizza Fridays" or "hotdog Saturdays" for staff.

"This is a family business," Van Putte says. "We are in the middle of our busiest part of the year, and you're part of the family."

Van Putte knows it's easier for owners and executives to get through the spring season, since many of them have already been through multiple springs and also "have a little bit more responsibility or skin in the game."

"When you got a two-year veteran on the cash register working a 55-hour week, yeah, it gets very tiring, and they're probably thinking to themselves, 'What did I get myself into?'" he says. "What we do in those cases is we just try to communicate."

That means managers or executives coaching employees through it — even just a quick conversation in the break room letting them know "I think I can see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"This pace will not last forever," Van Putte says. "We're all going to work together to get through it."

Although the spring season can be chaotic, our top IGCs say it's important to remember what all that chaos means for the business.

"I'm kind of different. I like spring," Glover says. "To me, it's when you make all your money. To me, it's something to look forward to. Yeah, it's a lot of work and stressful, but that's the business." ☐

Emily Mills is associate editor of Garden Center magazine. Contact her at emills@gie.net.



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2023 TRIAL STANDOUTS

Here are some of this year's best-performing varieties from trial gardens around the country.

Trial gardens provide IGCs with crucial information so that they can decide which plants will perform best for their customers. We asked several trial gardens to submit varieties in two key categories: best overall performance, annual; and best overall performance, perennial. Here are the picks that you should be stocking to wow your clientele in the spring.

TRIAL GARDEN MANAGERS

Chad Miller

Colorado State University

Kristi Challenger

Raker-Roberta's Young Plants

Penny Merritt-Price

Young's Plant Farm

Sam Schmitz

Ball Horticultural Company

Sandra Begani

University of Georgia

Rachel Gooder

Plantpeddler

Brian Weesies

Mast Young Plants

Laura Robles

Walters Gardens

Doug Cole

D.S. Cole Growers

Photos courtesy of trial managers
Compiled by Chris Markham

BEST OVERALL PERFORMANCE: ANNUAL



SAM SCHMITZ, BALL

1. Coleus Solar Flare (Ball FloraPlant)

Plants performed in both sun and shade. Its unique leaf shape with “electrified” edges was attractive and eye-catching. Containers or landscape, the plant filled in nicely with little to no flowering.



2. Impatiens Beacon Lipstick (PanAmerican Seed)

Newest color in the Beacon assortment; continued the series’ high resistance to impatiens downy mildew. Its color is deeper than rose and kept flowering through all conditions in our shade-covered pergola and other landscape beds.



CHAD MILLER, COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

1. Dahlia Dahlegria Apricot Tricolor (Syngenta)

This entry holds the distinction of winning the “Best of Show” from both the industry and public evaluations! This plant is stunning on many levels. Flowers are a stunning combination of fruit stand colors, such as apricot yellow, raspberry and magenta. The dark foliage makes a beautiful plant even without the flowers, but when combined, it is truly fascinating. Single petals and a pretty yellow eye are also a favorite of bees. It was bred for mildew resistance.

DOUG COLE, D.S. COLE GROWERS

2. Rudbeckia Sunbeckia series (Hartwig Bull)

We found the Rudbeckia Sunbeckia series to be an outstanding addition to the summer/fall offering. These Sunbeckia are bred by Hartwig Bull of Germany. There are a number of varieties with different flower patterns. These are great to offer at the same time as mums to increase sales in late summer. Once they start to flower, they continue to be covered with color.



BRIAN WEESIES, MAST YOUNG PLANTS

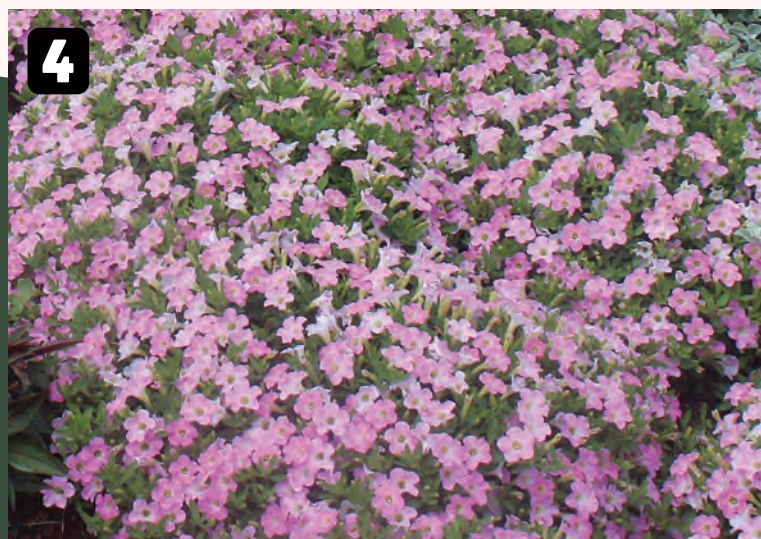
3. Begonia Solenia Chocolate Orange (Beekenkamp)

The “chocolate” description in its name refers to its dark chocolate brown foliage, and the bright, stunning flowers set against this earned it votes week after week! Solenia begonias are versatile and can be grown in sun or shade; ours that won this designation was grown under a shade cloth. It performed extremely well all season long, with an excellent habit and showstopping color.

RACHEL GOODER, PLANTPEDDLER

4. Petunia, Itsy Pink (Syngenta Flowers)

This series is an outstanding performer in all types of conditions. The Midwest was hit with some pretty extreme temperatures and low rainfall, and the Itsy Series looked great through it all. Full color all season, fast to fill the space and easy to care for. All of the colors — white, pink and magenta — performed the same. Outstanding petunia.



KRISTI CHALLENGER, RAKER-ROBERTA'S YOUNG PLANTS

1. Vinca Soiree Flamenco Salsa Red (Suntory Flowers)

This is a great addition to the Soiree Flamenco series. The vibrant dark red bicolor flowers and ruffled petals stand on dark green foliage and stunned all summer long. These maintained their mounded plant habit all summer and never stopped flowering.

SANDRA BEGANI, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

2. Calibrachoa Bumble Bee 'Hot Pink' (Ball FloraPlant)

From the greenhouse through September, Bumble Bee 'Hot Pink' has not skipped a beat. It rounds out the basket and concrete planter neatly and evenly. The colors are spectacular and catch the eye with a star-shaped pattern inside each flower.

PENNY MERRITT-PRICE, YOUNG'S PLANT FARM

3. Coleus Talavera Series (Syngenta Flowers)

Coleus loves heat, and with the new breeding, coleus has become a sun and shade plant that thrives in the southern garden. Talavera is a new series from Syngenta Flowers. The series includes unique colors in a compact habit that is late to flower. The standouts in our garden were Pink Tricolor, Moondust, Burgundy Lime and Sienna.



BEST OVERALL PERFORMANCE: PERENNIAL



SAM SCHMITZ, BALL

1. *Salvia officinalis* Silver Scent (Darwin Perennials)

Silver-green leaves paired well with other plants in beds and mixed containers. Very fragrant culinary sage. Low-maintenance plant. Tolerated many conditions with little attention.



2. *Echinacea* Double Scoop Deluxe Watermelon (Darwin Perennials)

Much more uniform than other double echinacea. High flower count on very sturdy stems that held up to the various environmental conditions throughout the summer. Attractive color and bold in the landscape.

(Also submitted for Best Overall Performance, Perennial by University of Georgia)



CHAD MILLER, COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

1. *Bouteloua gracilis* 'Honeycomb' (Intrinsic Perennials)

This blue grama grass was vigorous and developed into a nice display in its first year. The wispy eyelash-like inflorescences danced on the stem tips and were showy. In the early morning and late afternoon, the plants appeared to glow in the sunlight.

BRIAN WEESIES, MAST YOUNG PLANTS

2. *Lamistrum* Silver Frost (Ball FloraPlant)

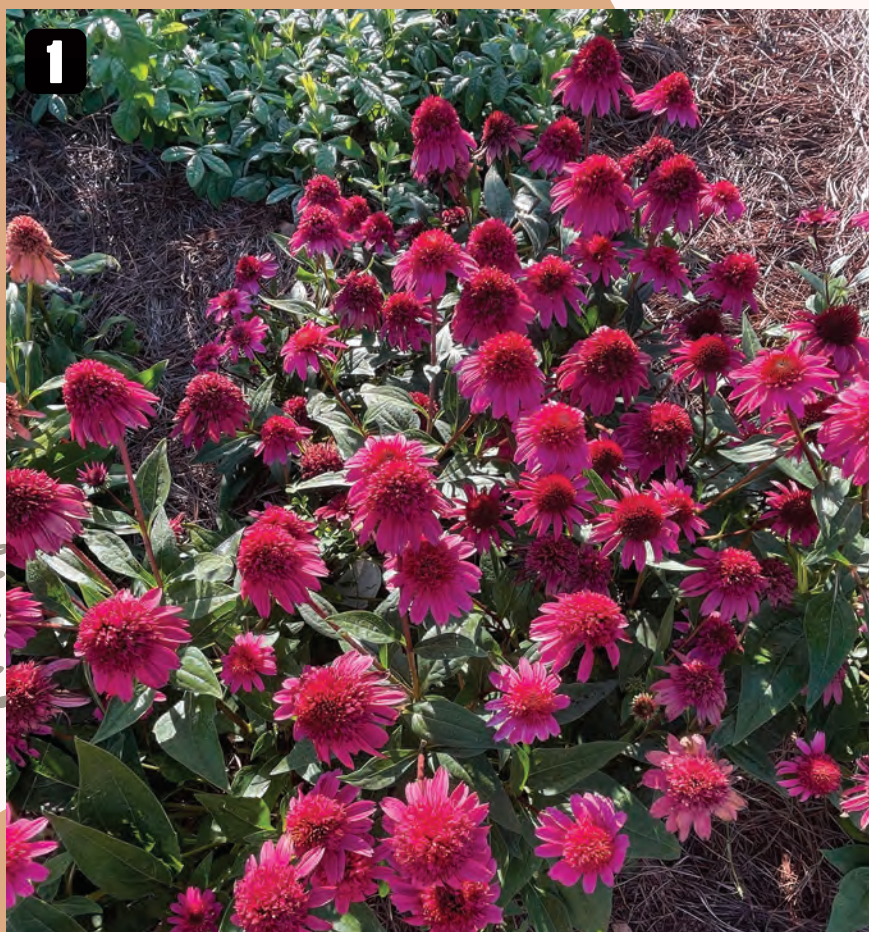
This tried-and-true variety got a late start, as we were not able to source the cuttings at the preferred time. This hardy perennial works well in ground cover programs, and the attractive silvery foliage also works well in annual combos as the spiller. Pair it with *Calliope* Medium Red for a bullet-proof combo.



KRISTI CHALLENGER, RAKER-ROBERTA'S YOUNG PLANTS

3. *Polemonium* Golden Feathers (Darwin Perennials)

This plant has golden variegated leaves that looked good all summer. Even though this is a part-shade plant, it was outstanding in full sun as well. Golden Feathers would be a great accent plant in the garden or a colorful component in combo pots. The early spring flowers and deer resistance are additional pluses. Golden Feathers stands out all season long.



**SANDRA BEGANI,
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**

**1. Echinacea Double Scoop
'Watermelon Deluxe' (Darwin
Perennials)**

With so many to choose from, the echinacea competition was fierce this year! Double Scoop 'Watermelon Deluxe' is the biggest, brightest and most plentiful in terms of blooms per plant, compared with other doubles and singles in the bed.

(Also submitted for Best Overall Performance, Perennial by Ball)

**LAURA ROBLES,
WALTERS GARDENS**

**2. Astilbe 'Dark Side of the
Moon' (Proven Winners)**

This new dark leafed astilbe in the Proven Winners program has gorgeous, deep chocolate burgundy foliage and is the only dark leaf selection on the market with purple flowers. Emerging foliage is yellow with a dark margin and glossy sheen, becoming completely dark as it matures. This astilbe performs best in the north in full sun with adequate moisture but also performs well in shade. Farther south, this plant will do best with more shade.



For more results on how varieties performed in specific categories, such as pollinator friendliness, heat tolerance, drought tolerance and more, read more on greenhousemag.com.

Chris Markham is assistant editor of Greenhouse Management magazine. Contact him at cmarkham@gie.net.

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FEED THE BIRDS

FEBRUARY IS NATIONAL BIRD FEEDING MONTH. According to *Garden Center* magazine's 2023 State of the Industry Report, more than 1 in 3 respondents (38%) have a wild bird/birding products division. Check out these tips from the National Garden Bureau to educate your customers about birds, the various types of foods they need and how to create bird-friendly backyard habitats.

1 SKIP PESTICIDES AND RODENTICIDES

The chemicals kill insects and rodents — a bird food source — and can poison the birds consuming the prey.

2 LEAVE THE LEAVES

Decaying leaves and fallen debris serve as a natural mulch. That mulch is also a perfect habitat for invertebrates that birds eat, including the pupae of moth caterpillars, a favorite food source for baby birds.

3 SAVE THE SEEDS

Instead of deadheading annuals and perennials in the fall, do nothing. Allow seed heads to remain on plants as natural bird feeders.

4 APPRECIATE THE BEAUTY OF DEAD TREES

Unless your home is in danger, leave dead trees standing. More than 80 species of birds rely on dead trees (called snags) for nesting, storing food, hunting, roosting and resting.

5 BEING BIRD-FRIENDLY IN A SMALL AREA

Grow a container garden filled with bird favorites or add planters filled with nectar-rich flowers. Add a birdbath, birdhouse or feeder to your balcony. Place a basket of bird-safe, natural fibers, like cotton and short pieces of yarn, on your patio for use as nesting materials.



6 BUILD A BRUSH PILE

Collect fallen tree branches, cuttings from shrubs, non-diseased veggie plants and even this season's live Christmas tree to create a shelter for birds and wildlife from bad weather and predators.

7 PLANT MORE FOOD SOURCES FOR BIRDS

Add plants that feed both insects and birds, like echinacea, coreopsis, rudbeckia, switchgrass, goldenrod, and *Liatris*. Hummingbird favorites include salvias, asters and monardas. (You can find plants native to your area that are good for birds at audubon.org/native-plants.)



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If address changes are needed, please make them to the label below.

1. Which of the following best describes your business?

- ☐ Independent Garden Center
- ☐ Independent Nursery with Retail Operations
- ☐ Independent Greenhouse with Retail Operations
- ☐ Other _____

2. What best describes your title?

- ☐ Owner
- ☐ Partner
- ☐ President
- ☐ Executive
- ☐ General Manager
- ☐ Merchandising Manager
- ☐ Supervisor
- ☐ Manager
- ☐ Buyer
- ☐ Other _____

3. What is the retail square footage at this location?

- ☐ 999 sq. ft. or less
- ☐ 1,000 - 2,499 sq. ft.
- ☐ 2,500 - 4,999 sq. ft.
- ☐ 5,000 - 9,999 sq. ft.
- ☐ 10,000 - 24,999 sq. ft.
- ☐ 25,000 - 49,999 sq. ft.
- ☐ 50,000 sq. ft. or more

4. What is the annual sales volume at this location?

- ☐ \$149,999 or under
- ☐ \$150,000 - \$249,999
- ☐ \$250,000 - \$499,999
- ☐ \$500,000 - \$999,999
- ☐ \$1 million - \$2.9 million
- ☐ \$3 million - \$9.9 million
- ☐ \$10 million +

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