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## Cashing in on the Top Four Gardening Motivations of 2020

The spring of 2021 is here! During 2020, despite a very difficult start, many plant retailers had an excellent year – even record-breaking. *Why?* In light of COVID-19, people’s everyday activities, travels, and usual spending habits changed significantly. People were traveling less due to the global pandemic and staying home more. How did consumers spend their money during 2020? According to an [CNBC report](#), many people spent their discretionary money on new pets, home improvement projects, and new gadgets to combat pandemic stay-at-home boredom. Garden centers and landscapers also cashed-in on the home improvement spending during 2020.

According to a Scotts Miracle-Gro [survey published in June 2020 in Garden Center Magazine](#), the primary reasons for gardening or landscaping during the pandemic were to stay busy (54%), to feel a sense of accomplishment (49%), to reduce stress (48%) and to access fresh food (33%). Two thirds (67%) of adults were growing or plan to grow edible plants, including vegetables (52%), herbs (33%) and fruits (31%). Let’s breakdown how you can cash in on those gardening motivations for the spring 2021 season.

### Staying Busy at Home

Consumers were staying home more than ever, especially those that now work and/or teach their children at home. Without traveling, parties, and social events people were hungry for something to do that was fulfilling and fun. Even our own Extension horticulturalists at Michigan State University saw record numbers of registrants (over 2,500!) for their “Cabin Fever Conversations” where they talked about planning their 2020 gardens.

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Incidentally, [Cabin Fever Conversations](#) is again ongoing this winter and is a great program to promote to customers.

As a plant retailer, you should emphasize how plant projects are a nice change of pace and are fun. During 2020, packages especially for kids were extremely popular and will be hot again this season. Your garden center could host a socially distanced or an in-person planting party. If you are hesitant about an in-person offering, take a cue from K-12 educators who were forced to be creative during virtual learning. Consider changing those to live stream plant parties. Participants can pick up a kit of items at your store and then take it home and join the party. Pizza garden anyone? Cat planter (Photo 1)? Salad bowl (Photo 2)?

The motivation to stay busy went largely beyond children and small projects. Retailers were selling record numbers of large woody shrubs as people embarked on bigger and better landscape projects. Even I expanded a garden to add splashes of annual color while staying busy at home (Photo 3). People started looking at the inside and outside of their home more and decided to do something about it.

### Feeling Accomplished

Welcome to 'Blurrs-day' everyone: As people worked, lived, and played at home, many people lost complete track of the day of the week. As many of us lived 'Groundhog Day,' where every day felt the same, consumers were looking for a sense of accomplishment. A new garden, especially one where consumers grew their own food, combated pandemic fatigue, boredom, and even food boredom. Even a small container of strawberries adds fun to customer's gardens and palates (Photo 4).



Photo 1. Garden retailers can appeal to children by offering planting projects that are fun for children, such as this cat planter, who will need fun haircuts. Photo credit: Koetsiers Greenhouse, Grand Rapids



Photo 2. Garden retailers can develop a salad bowl, including edible flowers for spring sales. Photo credit: Bridget Behe



Photo 3. Many consumers installed new gardens in effort to stay busy at home, including me. I jazzed up my young arborvitae hedge with lots of color. Photo: Heidi Lindberg

As more people sheltered in place and restaurants were often closed, two-thirds of Americans cooked more at home during COVID-19 (Hartman Group, 2020). What's for dinner? The same dish you've made for months? Garden retailers should consider capitalizing on the food boredom by sharing new and interesting recipes on their social media and encouraging people to use their homegrown herbs, vegetables, and fruits in a variety of ways (Photo 5). Teach people how to create a tasty salad with their own strawberries, create a zingy new salsa, a fresh pesto straight from the herb garden, or a stir fry with the newly-picked garden snap peas. Have you ever made your own dill pickles? Maybe this is the year to try! Take customers beyond the cash register and to the dinner table through connecting on social media. Buying those vegetable or flowering plants was really the first step in their adventure. Be sure to schedule regular social media posts to help them with problems and challenges (can you tell what blossom end rot is?) to the dinner table with recipes that will get them out of their food rut.



Photo 4. A creative food container: a strawberry planter in a red colander. Marketing fruit in creative ways engages consumers to grow and prepare their own foods. Photo: Heidi Lindberg



Photo 5. Consider sharing interesting food recipes on your social media to link their fresh-grown herbs to their dining table. Photo: Creative Commons

## Reduce Stress

It comes as no surprise that as the United States passes the grim milestone of a half of a million deaths from COVID-19, these pandemic times have been stressful. Many people either contracted the virus, lost loved ones, or lost other aspects of their lives: most importantly jobs, income, and stability. Parents were forced to learn to homeschool their kids or to just simply prevent them from picking at each other all day and as many of the normal 'outlets' for their energy had disappeared.

Now is the time to show consumers the many physical and mental health benefits of gardening and spending time outdoors.



Photo 6. Garden retailers should be marketing the many physical and mental health benefits that gardening provides to their consumers. Photo: Bridget Behe

While we still have to socially distance with each other as the pandemic trudges on, we do not need to distance from plants and nature. Dr. Charlie Hall and Dr. Melinda Knuth published four [articles](#) on the benefits of plants and how they support the physical, emotional, and mental health of people.

Here are some of the benefits that you can advertise to your consumers (Photo 6):

- Gardening is a great form of exercise which aids in weight loss, reduced stress, and increased cardiac health.
- Being in the vicinity of plants increases immunity from illnesses.
- House plants absorb toxins, increase air quality, and promote well-being

Not only should gardening provide these direct health benefits, make it fun! Seek to promote colors and display mixed containers that are visually striking.

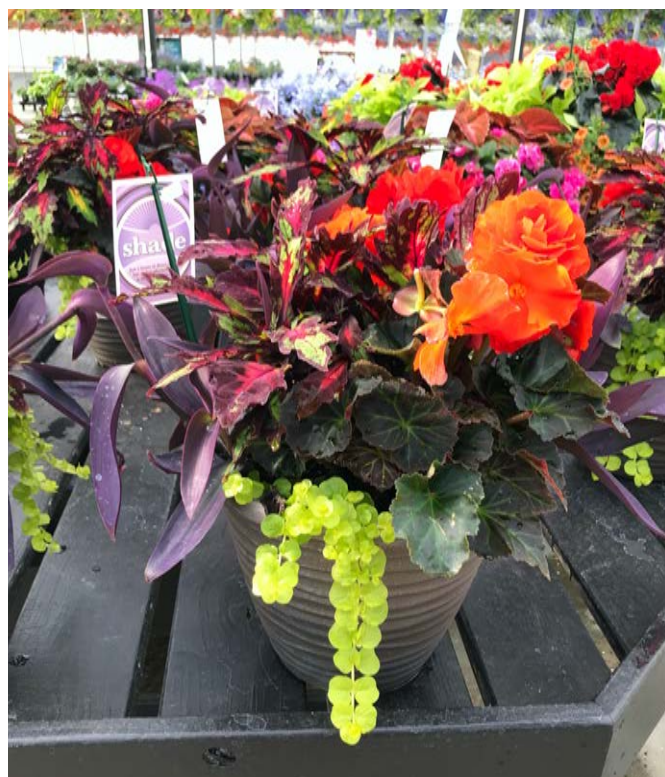


Photo 7. Use color contrasts to create captivating containers, such as this one featuring purple, orange, and chartreuse green. Photo: Heidi Lindberg

How about contrasting colors such as purples and oranges mixed together (Photo 7)?

Retailers can also promote the 2021 Pantone color of the year, a sunny yellow. If you want to hear Bridget's podcast on how to use the 2021 Pantone colors, listen to [Episode 130](#) (Season 3).

### Access to Fresh Food

Food insecurity has been a problem in American households prior to the pandemic, affecting 10.5% of U.S. households in 2019 according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. During the economic crisis during the pandemic in 2020, [NPR reported](#) that research published by Northwestern University estimated that COVID-19 had caused that figure to double among the general U.S. population and tripled in households with children. Approximately 1 in 3 households faced food insecurity during 2020.

How can garden retailers promote food security in U.S. households? Encourage your consumers to grow their own food! People can experience food insecurity without hunger when they fear that there may not be sufficient fresh vegetables, herbs, and fruits for them and their family.

The National Garden Bureau coined these vegetable gardens grown during the pandemic as 'Victory Gardens 2.0,' reminiscent of those planted during the two world wars. Retailers can promote vegetable gardening for consumers by promoting the health benefits and the enjoyment of plants. Why not sell a bundle of plants for cocktails or one that contains herbs for pizza or for the grill (Photo 8)?



Photo 8. A 'Good Grillin' Mix' planter connects consumers with an enjoyable summer pastime - grilling. It contains: dill, tarragon, thyme, rosemary, and parsley. Photo: Heidi Lindberg

These bundles reduce the time it takes for the consumer to seek out each of these plants and also helps move inventory, especially inventory that has typically a lower margin. If you want more information on creative ways to market vegetables and herbs this spring, listen to the Marketing Munchies Podcast [Episode 138](#) (Season 4).

### Take Home Message

May 2021 is likely to look very different from May 2020 as vaccines are rolling out across the country and more is known about the novel coronavirus. But we are still in the midst of a pandemic and the marketing campaigns of garden retailers should be reflect the top four gardening motivations of last year:

1. Staying busy at home
2. Providing a sense of accomplishment
3. Reducing stress
4. Helping people have access to fresh and healthy food

Whether consumers choose to shop with you via curbside service, delivery, or in-person, you can help your consumers to enjoy their landscapes and provide them with the many health benefits that come with gardening and being outdoors.

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