



Adaptation

Sacramento nurseries change during COVID-19 to keep customers safe—and stay in business

BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON

Imagine having to totally rethink how you do business during your busiest time of the year. That's what happened to local nurseries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We did an instant pivot," said Angela Pratt, owner of The Plant Foundry in Oak Park. "We had one week when we were still in shock, right after the shutdown was announced. When we realized we would be allowed to stay open, we had to find a new way to reach customers right away."

For most nurseries, spring sales make up the bulk of their annual income. Deemed essential businesses, nurseries were allowed to stay open during the lockdown because they sell food in the form of edible plants.

But what if customers don't want to go out to shop?

"We now offer a lot of new ways to reach our customers: phone orders, web orders, curbside pickup, no-contact checkout and deliveries," Pratt said. "We also came up quickly with safety protocols— 6-foot social distancing especially. That made us rethink everything we do. How do we accept deliveries? How do we limit contact with delivery drivers? How do we help load a half wine barrel into their car?"

Pratt opted to go as safe as possible, limiting the number of customers—three—that she believed could be in the nursery at the same time as staff. Gates are closed during deliveries.

"We stopped accepting cash and checks; we're all contactless," she added. "Customers can call us and we'll tell them what's in stock. Although things have really loosened up lately, we're still encouraging customers to wear masks. All our staff wears masks. We're an open-air shop, which is good, but we're very, very, very strict about social distancing. That's the only way we're going to get through this thing."

As for those edible plants, they suddenly became in very high demand.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PLANT FOUNDRY

"Everything edible is really selling: fruit trees, herbs and vegetables, edible vines such as passionflower or hops," she said. "People want to grow things even vaguely edible. They're stuck at home, they want to grow their own food—and they can. It's a good impulse to fulfill."

Thanks to that interest in growing food, business has been good during the pandemic, Pratt said.

"This is the first year we'll sell out of stone fruit trees. We've already run out of potatoes; we've never done that. Seeds are flying off the racks. We even ran out of roses."

Pratt also saw many parents getting into gardening with their kids as a part of home schooling during the lockdown. "It's a way to teach about nature," she said.

The renewed interest in gardening has gone beyond edibles.

"Houseplants are back," Pratt said. "Before the pandemic, they were our biggest seller. Sales plummeted at first, but now, houseplants are selling again, too."

Social distancing, face masks and other restrictions will be around until there's a vaccine, Pratt expects. For now, she and her staff will keep doing what they're doing and help customers grow.

"We found our groove," she said, "and now we're going to stick with it." □

Debbie Arrington, an award-winning garden writer and lifelong gardener, is co-creator of the Sacramento Digs Gardening blog and website.

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