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## **Keeping Consumer Demand High: Riding the Green Wave of the COVID-19**

### **Garden Explosion**

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### **Summary**

During the Covid-19 pandemic as the nation enforced a precautionary lockdown to help prevent the spread of infection, many households became restless. While other businesses were experiencing hardships because of shutdowns, the green industry was in high demand with many reporting significant gains in sales and profits. Garden stores reported greatly increased sales of vegetable crops, edibles, seeds and gardening supplies. The Cooperative Extension Service also experienced an dramatic increase in requests for information on home gardening. In the 2018 National Garden Survey conducted by the Garden Media Group, 12 million Americans said, “I’m too busy to have much time for gardening” (Garden Media Group, 2018). Now with time on their hands, Americans began gardening in droves - and this is good news for the green industry!

*Keywords:* Covid-19, home gardening, green industry, new gardeners, increased plant demand, increased sales.

## INTRODUCTION

What do you do with time on your hands? Surveys report: gardening. When the Covid-19 pandemic forced Louisiana and the rest of the nation into a quarantine scenario in the spring of 2020, many people found themselves with extra time on their hands. During this time, the United States gained 16 million new gardeners with many of them under the age of 35. Adults were spending two additional hours a day outside during quarantine than before with 84% of Americans spending more time in their gardens than before the pandemic (Garden Media Group, 2021). Retailers reported a 10% increase in plant purchases from the year prior and additional research in 2020 revealed a 4% increase in consumer spending on plants compared to 2018 levels (Grassi, 2021).

With gyms, entertainment venues and restaurants closed and people no longer having to commute to work, a surplus of time remained. In addition, supply chains were uncertain, food availability was a concern, and people did not want to spend one more minute indoors - so they turned to gardening in record numbers. There was anecdotal evidence all across the state and the nation that indeed people were gardening. Nevertheless, was this real? I personally witnessed it. Neighbors who in the past paid a company to maintain the lawn were now out in their lawns tackling garden projects or putting in a vegetable garden for the first time. People just wanted to get out of the house and use this newfound time to be productive, physically active and get some fresh air.

As the consumer horticulture extension specialist for Louisiana, I wanted to understand how the forced quarantines affected the amount of gardening consumers did. A consumer

gardening survey was put together asking participants all across Louisiana about their gardening habits during the pandemic, the buying activities of those consumers from their own perspectives, and the perspective of the retail garden centers.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A survey entitled Gardening in Louisiana during Covid-19 was developed containing 17 questions and was distributed to people across the state of Louisiana. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Determination of Exempt Human Subjects Research was applied for and approved through Louisiana State University (#HE20-39). The survey was delivered using Qualtrics and distributed through email listings from extension offices and LSU AgCenter social media outlets. Participants were 18 years and older and of every demographic (N=2,195).

## **RESULTS**

The survey asked participants how long they have been gardening, how much time they spent in the garden prior to and during the stay-at-home orders, and how much time they expect to spend in the garden after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey revealed that 59% of participants were already avid gardeners and had been gardening for more than 10 years, 11% for five to 10 years, 17% for one to five years, and 10% said they were first-time gardeners. The most exciting find for me was that 10% were first-time gardeners. Next, participants were asked if they had increased the amount of time they spent gardening during the pandemic. Results showed that 82% of the participants said they had increased the amount of time spent gardening (Fig. 1).

When asked how often they were gardening during the pandemic, 46% reported they were gardening five to seven days a week and 35% said they were gardening three to five days a

week. One of the most important lessons learned from the survey might be the reasons people garden. The No. 1 answer was “because it makes me happy” at 88%. Other answers included stress relief and relaxation at 88% and to be out in nature and outdoor physical activity at 87%. This confirmed my belief that, indeed, most people garden because of its well-being benefits. Many studies have shown that gardening activities have been associated with enhanced positive emotions and decreased negative ones (Theodorou, 2021).

Additionally, the survey indicated that 81% of participants plan to continue to garden at this rate after the pandemic (Fig. 2). The results are promising for the green industry - and that is good news for everyone involved. These results align with another recent gardening survey conducted by Axiom Marketing that found 86% of homeowners plan to continue gardening in 2021.

Finally, the survey asked participants how they found the information they needed on gardening during the pandemic, and 51% of Louisianans said they found their information from the LSU AgCenter website, social media pages, news articles and local agents; this was another great find from this research.

Throughout history, the Cooperative Extension Service, which is administered through land-grant universities in this country, has answered the call to help people, and 2020 was no different. We have seen throughout history in events such as World War I, the Great Depression and World War II when Cooperative Extension worked to support rural and urban Americans learn to grow and preserve food.

## **DISCUSSION**

Several trends have emerged from the pandemic. Perhaps one of the most profound has been that young homeowners have led to a gardening boom in 2020. According to a survey conducted by Axiom Market entitled “Axiom 2021 Gardening Insights Survey: Gardening in a COVID-19 World” – 57% of respondents (ages 19-28 and 29-39) reported they visited garden centers more during the pandemic and spent the highest mean dollars on plants than all other age groups. Some 90% of participants (ages 19-28) acknowledged that they felt successful with gardening. So, how do we keep the momentum going? By keeping these gardeners successful. There is a strong trend for local buying. E-commerce is up and sustainability is a market driver. Customers want to see products that are sustainably produced. That means reducing your carbon footprint, reducing the use of plastics and plant tags – and increased use of sustainable production practices such as reduced chemical use and water conservation for a greener planet

## **CONCLUSIONS**

These new gardening trends are here to stay. As an industry, we need to take what we learned during the pandemic and run with it. The supply chain has changed forever from all in-person shopping - to delivery and curbside pickup. Successful businesses will shift from the old models and be flexible to quick change. Consumers want convenience. The NGA survey of 2019 indicated that 10.4% of all garden and grocery shopping was done online - and curbside pick-up increased to 90% during the pandemic. One-quarter of Americans spent more money while social distancing from the comfort of their homes - and that is a likely a long-term trend. Bottom line: customers want convenience and speed for greater efficiency.

We are in an economic boom, the National Retail Federation (NRF) anticipates that retail sales will grow at least 10.5% in 2022, surpassing initial estimates at \$4.4 trillion and it will be the strongest year since 1984. If you want to get on the bandwagon, you have to get with the times. Social commerce is expected to reach 4.3% of retail e-commerce sales in 2022 at \$36.1 billion.

What do those consumers want from the green industry? Customers want container plants that are attractive and low maintenance. The container gardening trend is hot right now. People have smaller spaces to work with and they need options for growing. Containers can be the answer for many consumers. There will be a sustained growth in house plant demand and an increase in edible plants is expected in the years to come. Consumers also are gardening with wildlife in mind. In 2020, 67.2 million households purchased at least one plants because it benefited pollinators or birds.

Lastly, gardeners want everything at their fingertips. They want quick information they can find on tablets and phones. The demand is high and the momentum is up. Let's ride the green wave!

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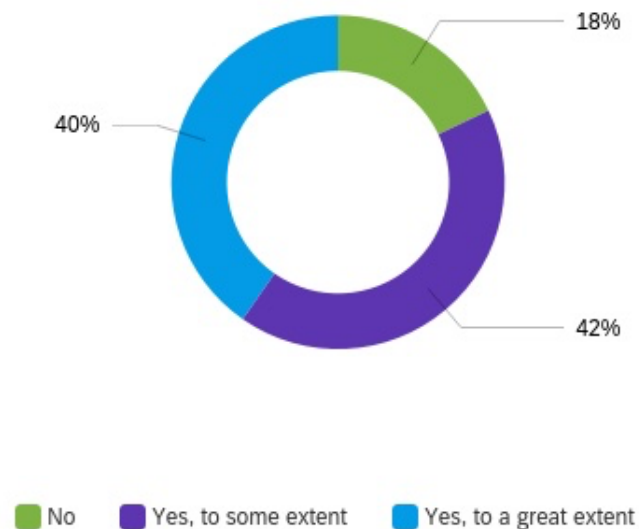
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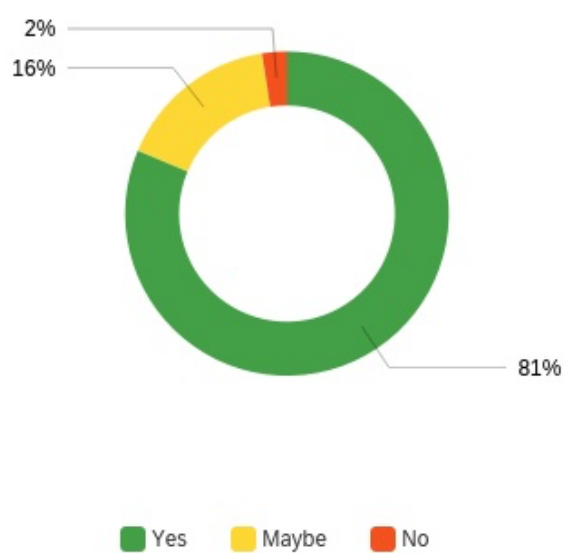
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**Figure 1.** A total of 82% of gardeners reported they increased the amount of time spent gardening during the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Figure 2.** Survey results indicated that 81% of gardeners disclosed they would continue to garden when things went back to “normal” after the pandemic.