

Gardening - A never-ending struggle

Sisyphus, the mythological arrogant king who found himself doomed to eternal toil, has had a pebble thrown onto his path, at least in the garden market.

Gardeners routinely do repetitive chores, like them or not, just to have to turn around and do them again. But I also see it in how commercial green-crop growers plug away year in and year out to bring us beautiful or edible horticultural crops.

And it ain't easy, balancing efficient, cost-effective techniques to produce sales-oriented harvests, carefully timed to be at their peak just as demands for them surges. Year in and year out they churn out crop after crop, filling and emptying greenhouses and fields, balancing inputs against expenses while

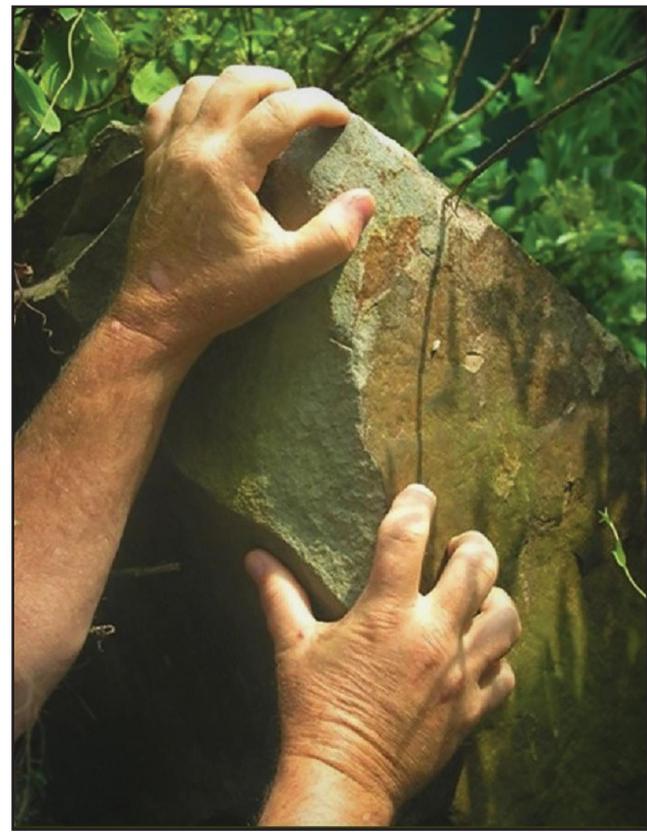
fretting over what consumers will want next year.

This requires understanding marketing trends, changing tastes (new plants competing with familiar heirlooms), logistics, personnel management, and more. Plus mastering horticultural tricks like using extra lighting to fool Easter lilies into flowering unnaturally early, or shading entire greenhouses in the fall to jump-start mums and poinsettias to flower just as fickle seasonal demands hit. And did I mention finding dependable, sensitive seasonal employees?

Whether it's a beautiful flower, a precious holiday symbol, or a plant that will sprout nutritious food, those behind-the-scenes people, usually working in insufferable summer heat and humid-



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ity, and winter cold, bending over tiny plants needing transplanting, watering just so, and pinching to make them fuller, are the backbone of horticulture. Anyway, one of the unexpected downsides to the

pandemic-fueled surge of new gardeners has been that so many people flocked to garden centers they overwhelmed supply lines that were years in the making. This really threw a spanner into horticultural gearboxes: Many ran out of plants

It's been a mixed blessing. Folks who sell ornamental or edible plants and plant products for a living have to be savvy gamblers, always keeping in mind the mantra "What you don't sell, you gotta smell." So they carefully hedge on this, overorder on that, hoping they hit it right when the next season rolls around.

But lately people have been snapping up whatever plants they could find, at whatever price. This would normally seem like a good thing, but with traditional plant sources running dry, a lot of retail outlets turned to other sources, with a lot of stuff showing up for sale that is alluring but not well-adapted to our climate.

Unlike newbies impressed with a single flower, a lone tomato, an errant butterfly wafting by, and the wonder of it all, we old hands expect a bit more of a return on our considerable investments of time, effort, and money spent on

supplies. We know that, when it comes to finding plants this year, "get 'em while you can" isn't always the best advice.

So, buyer beware. If you find something irresistible, by all means give it a go. But before expecting it to thrive, do some fast research on your phone, or ask a trusted employee their honest advice. Don't shop just for bargains - cultivate a relationship at a place that works towards your having a good enough experience there to want to come back happily for more later. Still, don't gamble too much time, effort, or money on what you aren't sure of.

Meanwhile, those who endure the Sisyphean tasks driving the Green Industry continue their toils. No sooner have they emptied this summer's greenhouses, than they've started climbing back down their now-steamy metaphorical mountain to look for another pretty rock to roll our way.

Time to plant for fall; here's hoping someone can get you what you want!

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