

A CATEGORY IN BLOOM

BY WANDA O'BRIEN



As more and more Canadians found themselves staying home this spring and summer, dealers found ways to grow sales with everything from patio sets to new varieties of plants.

2020 has been a year of reckoning as the world wrestles with the realities of a global pandemic. Small and big businesses have struggled to figure out new norms of operation and how to keep the economy running while keeping people safe.

Yet, out of the doom and gloom (or because of it), the outdoor living category was blossoming. With homeowners on lockdown and families forced to stay put to slow the spread of COVID-19, customers focused their attention on what they could control—their home environment and how to maximize their living space by boosting the potential of their backyard, patio or balcony.

From getting back to gardening basics to outdoor movie screenings, firepits to a charcoal barbecue resurgence, customers are investing in their exterior spaces to create the outdoor oasis that suits their style and serves their needs.

BACK TO THE ROOTS

The glitz and glamour of tricking out one's backyard like one out of a TV show inspires consumers, but there's a subtle and pervasive back-to-basics trend popping up that focuses less on bringing the indoors outside and more on how to nurture what already exists in nature.

Enticing bees, butterflies, birds and ladybugs—those beneficial creatures critical for pollination and healthy gardens—into the

yard is a conscious choice that customers are making when planting.

“Bringing beneficials back into your garden and caring about beneficials” has been popular for the last few years, says Annick Robitaille, the Ottawa-based merchandise manager at Lee Valley Tools. This is especially relevant for urban centres.

“As populations grow and lots gets smaller, you don't necessarily have the spaces for beneficial insects to hide out and be protected for the winter. They need logs and trees, and in new developments you don't have that, so that's where this trend came from.”

Robitaille has seen Lee Valley's pollen bee nest, a protected space for bees to lay their eggs, grow in popularity. Similarly, hummingbird feeders and wildflower mixes targeted to attract beneficials are in demand.

Beneficial insects will also support the “grow your own” movement and the consumer drive to plant vegetable gardens, in whatever size plot or pot works for them.

“The amount of people who are putting veggie gardens in their homes is unbelievable,” says Michael Allen, general manager for the North Vancouver and Powell River RONAs. He's seen an upsurge in people prioritizing space for a vegetable garden, even taking out landscaping like hedges or cedars to make space for garden growth.

“I think it's a lifestyle decision that people

are making. They want to be able to pick their own spinach and make that salad out of their own garden.”

“The veggie garden is a big focus for the customer,” says Johan Dumay, BMR Group's purchasing director. “It was a good category before, but this year it's amazing.”

BMR launched the Botaflora fertilizer line this year, and as Dumay says, “it was the best time to launch this product.” Whether in a larger backyard or on a smaller balcony, Dumay says people are purchasing gardening products in all sizes to work with the space they have available.

At Lee Valley, the Vegepod—self-watering planters that promote light and



Michael Perry is a horticulture expert from the U.K. known as Mr. Plant Geek.

protect against pests—sold out early on, says Robitaille. Lee Valley first came across the product at a trade show in Germany, and the uptake in North America continues to grow as people have more time in their yards.

Michael Perry, a horticulture expert from the U.K. known as Mr. Plant Geek, also touts the Vegepod as a great example of a cutting-edge product for the wannabe green-thumber. “It’s basically an elevated allotment, giving anyone access to growing their own fruit and vegetables.”

Perry says another U.K. trend for nurturing greenery is incorporating hardy exotic plants into outdoor design. He recommends banana species that can withstand -10C, dramatic-looking cordylines and unique climbers. “They can give a real vacation vibe and the exotic plant choices give a real luxurious feel to any garden.”

CASUAL ENTERTAINING REIGNS

“The [formal] dining category is all but dead,” says Allen. People are still eating outside, but having observed the industry for 17 years now, he notes the focus has now shifted to creating “the great room” outdoors to feel at home outside of your home.

Infused with the sensibility of the California room, this is a space where people are looking to add square footage to their living experience as an extension



BMR launched the Botaflo fertilizer line this year.

of the family room or kitchen, says Allen. Think outdoor kitchens with bar seating, televisions and firepits and big, comfy couches offering lots of extra seating with coffee and end tables.

“They’re really taking the traditional family room that we all grew up with and moving it outside. That’s where they eat and that’s where they entertain and it’s more about entertaining than it is about sitting down to have a meal.”

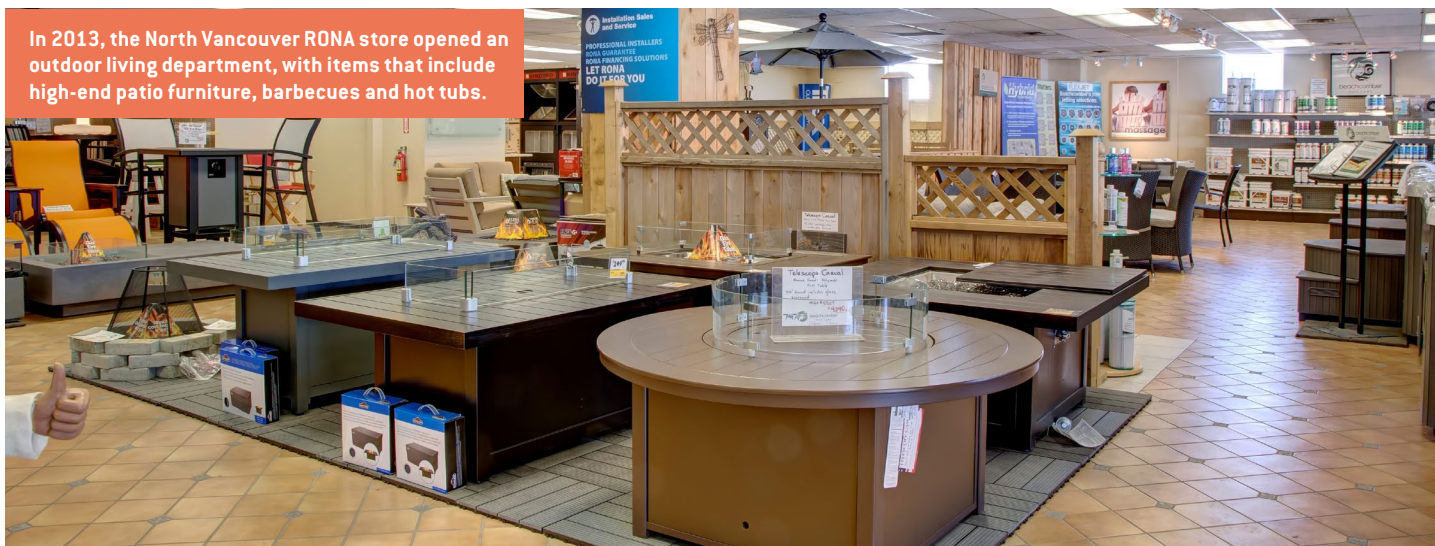
In 2013, the North Vancouver RONA store opened an outdoor living department, with items that include high-end patio furniture, barbecues and hot tubs. The department sales have quadrupled in seven years.

“It just shows how the consumer is committed to that space.”

West Coast weather is a selling point as it allows the outdoor investment to be enjoyed multiple months of the year, but even in Central Canada, with a much shorter outdoor season, people want fun and functionality outside.

“We started getting requests around making people’s backyards more useable,” says Ben Zlotnick, founder of both Aden Earthworks, a Toronto-based landscape design company, and Eden App, a lawn maintenance and snow removal app operational across North America. He says families are redirecting funds that would have

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Ben Zlotnick, a landscape designer in Toronto, says he's had a surge of requests to make backyards more usable.

been spent on vacation or sleepaway camp to their local space, making a getaway that's steps away.

"It used to be that they would go out for a Sunday night barbecue, but now they're literally in the backyard every single day." Pools, patios that can easily accommodate 10 people and outdoor kitchens are all in high demand.

GREAT TIME FOR GRILLERS

"There are two types of barbecuers," says Allen. There are those who are more casual and simply want something reliable for everyday barbecuing "and then there are the grillers." Allen says the sales for charcoal barbecues have risen as grillers create "a whole experience on the weekends" through charcoal, wood-pellet or smokers.

"I think that is going to be the way of the future," Allen says. "It's more natural cooking and people really enjoy it. As the experience outside your home gets better, people are going to find more ways to spend time outside and that's just one of the ways of doing it."

Particularly in households that have more than one barbecue, charcoal is becoming a fierce competitor for gas. With brands such as Weber and Broil King, Dumay at BMR says the growth has been very interesting

within the barbecue category. Broil King is a Canadian supplier with a manufacturing facility in Ontario as well the U.S. "We are very proud to work with them, and I think customers in Canada appreciate being able to buy from Canada."

Zlotnick says there's been an uptick in outfitting the outdoor kitchen that speaks to usability. In addition to traditional gas barbecues and charcoal or wood pellets, pizza ovens also create an entertaining ambiance while providing a family friendly meal option.

EXTENDING THE EVENING

When the sun sets, the entertainment doesn't need to end with the proper lighting set-up.

Lighting is now part and parcel of renovating any outdoor living experience, says Allen. "Lighting that was in your house we're now putting outside your home. It's not just a motion detector with a flood light to catch the racoon in your backyard." Customers want decorative lighting to extend their experience into the night. Exterior chandeliers, lit-up pendants and watered lighting are some of the ways they're experimenting with outdoor lighting. One popular piece is the Treasure Garden umbrella with Starlux, which offers battery-operated LED lighting

inside the umbrella. "The atmosphere is spectacular," Allen shares.

Outdoor fireplaces are also sparking sales as an option for lighting as well as a focal point for gathering outside after hours. Sales within BMR's fireplace category caused Dumay to pause and take stock: "We don't see growth when I look at the data from three years ago in the fireplace category. It was more stable. But this year, I said 'Ok, what's happening?'" Web sales for firepits took off and were a leading category online.

And once the sun goes down, it's lights, camera, action! Zlotnick's design company has received requests for easy access to electrical from families without outdoor televisions so they can set up AV systems to do their own outdoor movie screenings. As people remain cautious of indoor public spaces, setting up your own personal movie theatre is a promising trend into 2021 and beyond.

PANDEMIC POSSIBILITIES

Robitaille of Lee Valley is hopeful that people who started to garden this year or did different things in their backyard or balcony will continue that next summer. "I think that would be the biggest win from this pandemic—that a lot of people opened their eyes to activities they might not have experienced in the past and perhaps have started a new hobby that they're excited to continue."

"I don't think we will ever see a 2020 again in the industry," Allen speculates when forecasting next year's sales. "2020 was a once-in-a-lifetime in our industry," he says.

He equates the investment in homes during the pandemic to what would have been spent on a family trip to Disneyland. People couldn't travel so they used the excess funds saved for a family vacation and spent it on a home improvement project instead. But he does expect the trends of managing a garden, together with a commitment to casual entertainment, to continue to inspire into 2021.

