

# How Can the Horticulture Industry Thrive in a Post-Pandemic Environment?



*Peter Konjoian is president of Konjoian's Horticulture Education Services Inc. His career spans four decades as a commercial grower, researcher and consultant. Jasmina Dolce is editor of GPN magazine. Konjoian can be reached at peterkfes@comcast.net.*

**Peter:** Well, boss, isn't this different? It's a pleasure having you as today's guest, Jasmina. Thanks for putting on a different hat for this discussion. As GPN's editor, is there anything about our industry's response to the pandemic that has caught your attention?

**Jasmina:** One thing that stands out in my mind is how nimble the industry has been. It's funny, in my position, I've always heard people say how slow the horticulture industry is to change. But even with this so-called reluctance to change, industry members were incredibly quick to adapt. No plant was wasted. I observed growers and garden center retailers find new and different ways to sell their products. Many of them learned new ways to capitalize on all things digital.

I think it's been a long time since our industry has had a voice, at least a loud one. So if there is any silver — er, green? — lining, it's that our voice returned and it was deafening! Growers, breeders, garden center operators, plant marketers and all plant lovers found ways to show their love for what they do and promote ways to support the industry. And it worked. The gardening industry had a record year, earning more than 15 million new gardeners in 2020!

**Peter:** Your choice of nimble as a descriptor strikes a chord with me. I use the word often to describe the ability small growers have to react and respond to the marketplace. Sometimes large operations require more time to re-tool before shifting gears, crop production-wise. The small fish can change direction more quickly than the large one in order to survive, an analogy that fits my industry experience. It can be a dangerous generalization, however, as some large operations also have the organizational DNA to turn on a dime. For either category of grower last year was not the time to be a lumbering dinosaur, for sure.

Your description of last year's industry-wide response to the pandemic is excellent. For an industry, as you state, that many describe as painfully slow to change, good for those who did, right? It's wonderful, and about time, so many new consumers are discovering that plants and gardening rock! A topic for another day ... why did it take a global pandemic for this to happen? Why haven't we been able to do this for ourselves?

Regardless of our respective uses of nimble, I find it fascinating that you chose the word. Building on that observation, what are you expecting this year after last year's surprising gains? Will the COVID effect on horticulture, specifically, and agriculture in general be permanent?

**Jasmina:** I sure hope so! But it's really hard to say. I've seen industry trends cycle, go up and down, and back again. Certain categories have certainly seen significant

growth in recent years (i.e., vegetables, herbs, succulents, houseplants). Only so much is in our control, and we need to take that into account and focus on those things in our control. So I think as an industry it is important to keep the train moving. Just because life may be inching toward normalcy, we need to continue promoting our products. And pay attention to the consumer. What trends resonate with those new gardeners? What product categories tie into current lifestyles? Now that we found our voice, use it!

**Peter:** I believe your finger is squarely on the pulse of this welcomed new business, Jasmina. Growers who make the effort to tune in to these new gardeners will likely learn that they want to be spoken to differently. Differently in terms of communication about products, gardening

practices, and how they want to use plants in their lives. This is where your earlier comment about horticulture being traditionally slow to change could slow the

It's encouraging to witness urbanites finally viewing agriculture as exciting, healthy and relatable to their lives.

train down. If we insist on talking to these new gardeners as we've always talked to earlier generations of gardeners, we might miss the mark and lose them. And, no doubt, growers responding to these new customers in ways they demand will require that nimbleness referenced a minute ago.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, again, a significant demographic of these new consumers appears to be urban gardeners. It's encouraging to witness urbanites finally viewing agriculture as exciting, healthy and relatable to their lives. For whatever reason, pandemic or other, our

industry at long last succeeded in connecting with this group.

I'm going to pull the lens back with the next question to draw your many years of industry service into the conversation. What industry response has most surprised you during your time in the editor's seat?

**Jasmina:** I mentioned it earlier, but the use of social media has really surprised me in really impressive ways. There are so many companies out there that never had social media pages, or if they did they rarely updated them. Then quarantines and lockdowns forced us all to communicate in all these new, digital and virtual ways.

Not only did these companies create profiles on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc., but they used those very platforms to show a real honest view into their world. They were transparent. I think our industry is one where the behind-the-scenes perspective is unknown to the public. Gardeners, especially new gardeners, may not be aware of all the things that go into the creation and production of a plant. But I flip through my Instagram feed now, and see video stories from inside a greenhouse and all the care that goes into the products we find on the retail shelf.

Nowadays, consumers love a good story. And so many people in the industry were willing to share theirs.

**Peter:** Thank you for that positive reset on social media. I find myself tainted regarding these platforms as nastiness and bullying practiced by cowards hiding behind keyboards has crept into our culture. It's caused me to respond with an adage I've adopted for other aspects of life ... just because we can doesn't mean we should. So thank you for resetting my mind on social media's powerful and positive potential. Continuing, how will growers and farmers adapt to the new social normal?

**Jasmina:** I am confident they will continue to be nimble and prepared to adapt. If anything, the past year was a reminder of how quickly the market can change. We went from complete panic in early spring 2020, not knowing if ANY plants would sell at all, to summer and fall 2020, when garden centers couldn't even keep their stores stocked.

That being said, it took a lot of effort to implement new strategies over the past year. Things like rearranging their greenhouses to

accommodate spacing, incorporating totally new crop categories, installing new software that can be controlled from anywhere, reformatting shipping departments to allow for online sales, etc. All these new tools and practices will continue to be useful as we move forward.

**Peter:** There it is again, the recurring theme for our conversation. Navigating the pandemic has brought out the best in us, it called out to us to be creative and adaptable in order to survive. I'm hoping that at least half and hopefully more of last year's gains can be repeated this year. And if that turns out to be the case, building on these gains in 2022 could be seismic for our industry. Next, how has the trade magazine sector changed in recent years?

**Jasmina:** Just like any other industry, the digital world has become so important. While I will always have a deep appreciation for reading words on actual paper (that will NEVER go away), there has been an obvious transition to web-based content. This isn't anything necessarily "new." We've been headed down this path for years now, but I think the pandemic definitely accelerated this transition.

My objective as an editor has always been to deliver informative and timely content to our audiences, regardless of the platform. In recent years, we have been utilizing digital platforms more often — such as e-newsletters, educational webinars and videos. And I think we will continue to do so.

But don't you dare think you'll ever take away the magazine from me! I don't know about you, but there is just something so meditative and tranquil about sitting somewhere comfortable (not my desk), turning page by page, and slowly absorbing the words in front of me.

**Peter:** I'm with you, partner, I still enjoy holding a magazine or book in my hands. I like having the ability to quickly flip backward or forward to find a fact, then return to the page I'm on. My wife has shifted completely to books on tape after reading real books for decades. I continue to prefer reading traditionally, although I'm completely online for my daily news and sports news now.

Last question, how do you envision us returning to in-person industry events such as trade shows and conferences, workshops, and industry tours?

**Jasmina:** I wish I had a crystal ball to answer this question. I think it will take some time for people to feel truly comfortable being out and about in social settings. In my perfect world, we would be at that point already! But I know there are so many factors to take into consideration. There will probably be a period where industry events are more of a hybrid type of setup — some in-person components along with virtual elements.

There are industry events taking place in upcoming months after a hiatus last year, and I think those will kind of be our way of "getting our feet wet." The California Summer Trials will be taking place later this month, which — from what I understand — will be mostly outdoors. And Cultivate will follow in July. Of course, attendance will be down from previous years. That is to be expected. But I think these events will provide industry members with a glimmer of hope. Things CAN return to normal. We will get there, but it will just take some time.

**Peter:** Thank you, chief, for your industry level insight. And for your willingness to try on a different hat for this conversation. It fits you well; your perspective is uplifting and refreshing. You may even have nudged this gray beard to view social media more positively. [gpn](#)

## Meet Your Editorial Team



Jasmina Dolce  
Editor



Tim Hodson  
Editorial Director



Teresa McPherson  
Retail Editor

*"One of my favorite things about being an editor is telling stories. Whether it's news of a company expansion or a story about an innovative way to sell more plants, I strive to provide accurate and engaging news and information that you need to keep your business successful."*

— Teresa McPherson —

**gpn**  
GREENHOUSE  
PRODUCT NEWS

Learn more about them at  
[gpnmag.com/contact](http://gpnmag.com/contact)