

Department of Plant Sciences

OPERATING A GARDEN CENTER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed nearly every aspect of our personal and professional lives. In Tennessee, like many states, garden centers have been deemed essential and may operate providing they meet specific criteria and abide by certain mitigation measures [(Executive Order 22, Food and Beverage Production and Agriculture (Section 7, Page 8)]. While stay-at-home orders have ended for most counties in Tennessee, the need to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 has not. Providing a reduced-risk shopping experience for all customers is critical, but may be particularly important for Baby Boomers, individuals born between 1946 and 1964, who are both at high risk for COVID-19 due to their age but also among the biggest spenders at garden centers. The purpose of this publication is to provide strategies that garden centers can implement to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. This publication will cover information related to social distancing, signage, sanitizing, advertising and social media, contingency plans, and related topics. It is the responsibility of each garden center to ensure it is operating in compliance with current, applicable local and state laws.

The Potential to Spread COVID-19

Understanding the virus that causes COVID-19 can help slow its spread in our workplaces and communities. Unlike with most illnesses, infectious individuals may or may not have symptoms. The virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to be mainly spread person to person and can be transmitted at least 6 feet when an infected person sneezes, talks or coughs. The virus can also be transmitted by a person touching a contaminated surface (such as one on which an infected person breathed or coughed) and then touching one's own mouth or nose. The stability of this virus on surfaces in a real-world environment with varying temperature, humidity and light levels, as well as exposure to water, via rain or irrigation, and heat has not been established. Ultraviolet light is known to degrade the nucleic acids that compose viruses and therefore outdoors is considered to be "cleaner" of viruses overall. However, this virus' ability to remain infectious outdoors, or on plant surfaces whether indoor or outdoor, is unknown at this time. For these reasons, precautions including sanitation and social distancing are imperative to protect garden center employees and customers alike.

Did You Know?

The virus that causes COVID-19 can remain infectious for up to*:

- Three days on plastic and stainless steel.
- Twenty-four or more hours on cardboard.
- Four hours on copper.
- Three hours in the air.

A previously studied coronavirus was recovered from lettuce.

*These results were obtained from experiments conducted in controlled laboratory conditions.

Social Distancing

Social distancing can be accomplished by spacing out customers and employees across various parts of your store.

Shopping from a Distance

Encouraging your customers to shop online may be an adjustment if they are not accustomed to it. Online shopping cannot replicate the sensory-filled experience of being in your garden center. Several strategies can facilitate your customers' transition to online or other distance shopping. Consider reducing your store hours. By doing so, you will encourage online transactions as well as create more time to thoroughly sanitize your store, pull orders for curbside pick-up, and limit employee-customer exposure.

Provide coupons either for distance purchases of plants and hardgoods, or for a reduced or free delivery to incentivize online, email and phone orders. Ask customers to like and share your business' social media for a discount on a distance purchase. As customers pull up for curbside pick-up, with their permission record a video of them saying "staying safe with [your garden center name]" and post it to your social media in exchange for a free plant as an incentive for distance shopping. If you have not previously offered distance shopping, this is a great time to try it and potentially convert it to a new income stream, post-pandemic. Depending on your customer base and location, you may find that incentives and discounts are not necessary.

Online Sales Demand

A Tennessee garden center that consistently averaged 10-12 online orders per week prior to the pandemic began averaging 30-plus per day. When the stay at home measures were implemented, the number of orders increased to 70 plus per day, and quickly topped 100 per day on three consecutive Saturdays.

Start small if you are beginning an online shopping platform. Consider listing a portion of your inventory, perhaps with a limited color selection that includes your top sellers, rather than trying to include bedding plants in the full range of colors that you offer in your store. See the Touchless Transactions Resource E-Commerce Guidance for Rural Business Managers from the Center for Rural Enterprise Engagement for detailed information about setting up an online sales platform.

If you cannot transition to an online sales platform at this time, allow customers to place orders by email or phone. Set up an automated reply or place helpful information in your email signature to alert customers to the expected wait time and general procedure since this will be new to them and they likely will have several questions.

By all accounts, pulling orders for customer pick-up is time consuming and will require a dedicated day of the week closed to in-store shopping or dedicated staff. One Middle Tennessee garden center closed on Mondays solely to allocate all staff time to pulling and preparing online orders for curbside pick-up.

Have clear signs guiding customers to the location for the pick-up and a number to call or text when they arrive to prevent them from getting out of their vehicle and searching for an employee. Use signage to alert customers to remain in their vehicle and pop the trunk and flash their lights. Clearly indicate that staff will load the plants or customers can load the plants, but not both.

In-Store Space

At your entrance, place cones for spacing so those waiting to enter have a visual reminder of social distancing, or use a roped line with flagging tape every 6 or more feet. Establish high risk-only hours at the beginning of each day. These reserved shopping hours help seniors, people with compromised immune systems and others at high risk feel welcome and more comfortable about shopping in person. The goodwill from the measures your store is taking specifically for them is bound to strengthen customer relations and loyalty.

If you have a small store, you may need to limit the number of customers and employees in the store at one time. Ask that customers come prepared by viewing your store's map and inventory online (Figure 1).

Some garden centers have reallocated parking to serve the dual purpose of aiding in limiting the number of shoppers while simultaneously reallocating space for curbside pick-up for online or

Find your way around our Garden Center



Figure 1. Include a map of your store and grounds on your website or at your entrance so customers can walk directly to the areas with products they are interested in. Image Credit: The Plant Kingdom



Figure 2 (above). Security may be necessary to limit and direct customer traffic. Photo Credit: Amy Fulcher



Figure 3 (right). Spray paint can be used to create 6 foot spacing reminders on your garden center's floor. Photo Credit: David Bates, Bates Nursery and Garden Center

email orders. If necessary, the assistance of the local police force or a security firm may be needed to direct and limit customers (Figure 2). One effective service that they can provide is helping route customers who are only shopping for plants to the outdoor sales lot so they do not pass through the store. Spread out displays and plants as much as your space permits.

Once customers have made their selections, avoiding congestion in line for payments and at the registers is important. Consider creating a visual reminder of 6-foot or greater spacing on your floor using (Figure 3):

- Spray paint.
- Tape.
- Cones.
- Plants, with labels explaining their purpose.

Cashiers may be particularly vulnerable to exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19 because they are stationed directly facing and in close proximity to the public for the duration of their shift. Likewise, if a cashier unknowingly becomes infected and is asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic, they may have a greater potential to spread COVID-19 to patrons because every paying customer interacts with a cashier and the cashier stations tend to be indoors. Tables placed between



Figure 4. Plexiglass can be affixed to cash register stations to protect cashiers and customers. Photo Credit: David Bates, Bates Nursery and Garden Center

the customers and the register can provide a 6 foot or greater distance. Plexiglass barriers (Figure 4) for cashiers can provide some protection for both customer and cashier. Plastic wrap or shrink wrap can be applied to a frame to create a makeshift wall or barrier (Figure 5). Use of a portable transaction payment system such as Square Reader or Stripe can allow greater flexibility, including allowing some customers to bypass the store. For example, customers purchasing only from outdoors sales areas may be able to pay outdoors.



Figure 5. An inexpensive frame and shrink wrap can be used to create a barrier. Photo Credit: David Bates, Bates Nursery and Garden Center

Even after local and state rules prohibiting gatherings have ended, consider offering educational classes and workshops via an online platform. Online classes allow you to connect with your customers and keep them engaged with your products and services while maintaining social distancing. Link products featured in the class to your online sales platform so that participants can easily purchase supplies or plants used in the class. If you think your customer base may need an incentive to place an online order, offer a discount if the order is placed within 24 hours of the workshop or on items related to the workshop's topic to facilitate online sales.

Signage and Work Apparel

Signage and work apparel can be an important part of the message you send to your customers. Signs near your entrance along with employee behavior and their apparel may instill enough confidence in your mitigation efforts for otherwise hesitant customers to enter your store. The following is a list of suggestions for signs and employee apparel to help communicate your garden center's mitigation message.

- Sign at entrance asking for only one shopper per family (Figure 6).
 - No children — Ask families not to bring children too young to understand social distancing or the importance of not touching items.
 - No pets — Dogs who are friendly enough to bring to a garden center are probably too friendly, or adorable, for social distancing. And, while you may be able to control your dog, other customers may not be able to resist approaching.



Figure 6. Remind customers to shop alone, leave children and pets at home, and practice social distancing while shopping. Photo Credit: David Bates, Bates Nursery and Garden Center

- #shopalone on signs and #shopalone shirts for employees.
- Directional signs for doors (enter through one and exit through the other) and aisles so customers do not come face-to-face when in close proximity with others.
- Signs guiding customers to multiple registers can prevent congestion.
- Signs directing customers to stay behind the plexiglass barrier or behind a 6-foot table at the register.
- Sample language for other signage:
 - Please keep 6 feet apart.
 - Please keep your trip short.
 - If you are sick, please call instead of coming in.
 - Please revisit us when we are less busy.
 - Understand we may be short-handed.
 - Please only touch the plants you purchase.

Sanitizing

COVID-19 is widely thought to be contracted directly, person-to-person, through respiratory aerosol or droplets or by touching a contaminated surface and then touching a mucus membrane. Therefore, sanitizing surfaces is an important component of mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a guide for cleaning facilities with EPA-recommended cleaning agents for use against the virus that causes COVID-19. Unexpired household bleach and alcohol (70 percent minimum) are readily available and recommended by the EPA.

It is important to **clean** first, then **disinfect**. Some cleaning products, like bleach, are deactivated by organic debris (i.e., plant material, dirt or potting soil), therefore, cleaning first is essential to allow the disinfectant to remain effective while in use and kill microorganisms.

- Cleaning refers to the removal of debris and dirt from an item or surface.
- Disinfecting refers to using chemicals to kill microorganisms on a clean surface. Disinfecting does not clean dirty surfaces, but by killing microorganisms on a surface after cleaning, it can further lower the risk of spreading infection.

The CDC recommends preparing a 1,000 parts per million solution by mixing

- 5 tablespoons (1/3 cup) bleach per gallon of water, or
- 4 teaspoons bleach per quart of water

and advises a contact time of at least 1 minute in order for the disinfecting agent to be effective. Note that these dilution directions are for regular, nonconcentrated bleach (5.25 percent). Be sure to allow proper ventilation during and after application. Never mix household bleach with ammonia or any other cleanser. Depending on the bleach product, water temperature may affect efficacy and longevity of the bleach solution that is prepared. A bleach solution made with sodium hypochlorite should be made with water that is 77 F or cooler to reduce the rate at which it is degraded into salt and water, and used within 24 hours of preparation. Bleach is deactivated by light; therefore, store bleach dilutions in an opaque container and out of direct sunlight.

What to Sanitize

High touch surfaces should be sanitized throughout the day as needed and at the close of business. Some garden centers have hired sanitation firms to spray a sanitizer throughout their stores and shopping carts. The CDC recommends cleaning and disinfecting the following types of high touch surfaces **before each use**:

- Shopping cart, wagon and cart handles.
- Point of sale keypads.
- Tables.
- Doorknobs.
- Light switches.
- Countertops.
- Handles.
- Desks, phones and keyboards.
- Toilets, faucets, sinks and bathroom stall latches.

A spray bottle or even pump up sprayer and paper towels can be kept near your entrance (Figure 7). Provide hand sanitizer at doors and registers, bathrooms and elsewhere in your garden center. If possible, prop doors open so customers do not need to touch them.



Figure 7. Keep disinfectants and hand sanitizer near entrances and instruct employees to clean high touch surfaces, such as cart and wagon handles, after each use. Photo Credit: Amy Fulcher

Proper Handwashing

Proper handwashing by your customers and employees is an important strategy to slow the spread of COVID-19. Post signs illustrating the proper method and duration — a minimum of 20 seconds. Be sure to post an illustration that includes instructions to turn off the faucet with a single-use towel to prevent recontamination after washing. You can post 20 seconds of lyrics to fun songs that your customers will recognize as inspiration for washing for the full duration. Another option is to offer additional handwashing stations, perhaps at the entrance, for use as people enter and exit. Portable handwashing stations can be rented for approximately \$90 per month, which includes a weekly refill of soap, water and single-use towels. A table with a carboy filled with water with a spigot that remains on while washing hands, soap, and paper towels can serve the same purpose inexpensively as long as you have a suitable way to catch the gray water so your customers' feet do not get wet or muddy.

Please consult the CDC for current recommendations on personal protective equipment such as gloves and masks.

Responsible Advertisement and Social Media

If your location is under a stay at home or similar government order, be particularly careful with the message your advertising is sending. Advertise and use social media responsibly, giving consideration to how your actions appear to someone whose business is, or was, shut down. Do not aggressively advertise for people to come out en masse, using phrases such as “bring the family.” Coupons and advertisements indicating “supplies are limited” or “get them while they last” may create a sense of urgency. Respect that edible crops are likely the reason your business

was considered “essential” and emphasize those in promotional efforts if you are operating under an essential business status. Exercise caution when referring to your customers’ safety in your advertisements or posts. Resist the urge to make claims about customer safety that are not directly supported by science. It is important to distinguish between **safe** and **safer** in your verbiage. Mentioning the steps that you have taken to make shopping at your garden center safer than it was may help customers become comfortable shopping in person again.

Employees and Resident Pets

Employees naturally want to socialize during breaks and slow periods at work, but consider the risk if even a small portion of your staff becomes sick with COVID-19. The risk extends from not being able to operate to the concern it creates in your community and among customers.

During the pandemic, consider limiting staff meetings and conduct those that are necessary virtually by services like Google Meet or Zoom or by observing aggressive social distancing in an open area.

One approach to minimize congestion among employees is to stagger start times so numerous employees do not converge at the time clock at once. For example, perhaps landscape crews and garden center staff start at different times.

Request that employees take their temperature each day and each night since the virus has been documented as causing temperatures to rise in the evening and night. However, you should be aware that some people with COVID-19 do not have a fever. If you require your employees to report their daily temperature checks and you are planning to maintain logs of their temperature, as with all medical information, the fact that an employee had a fever or other symptoms would be subject to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) confidentiality requirements. For more information about pandemic preparedness in the workplace and the ADA, refer to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission publication *Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace* and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Post signs as a reminder of symptoms and sanitary practices at employee entrances such as these provided by the CDC. Employees who appear to have symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath or others) upon arrival at work or who become sick during their shift should immediately be sent home. The CDC has expanded its list to include a range of symptoms. In the midst of the economic effects of various state and local stay at home orders, employees likely have a heightened concern about being able to pay their bills and may feel self-imposed pressure to come to work even if they are sick. Reassure them they will not lose their job and that the most important thing is not to come to work if they are symptomatic or otherwise have concerns about being infected.

[The Families First Coronavirus Response Act \(FFCRA\)](#) requires that employers with fewer than 500 employees provide sick, medical and family leave for specific COVID-19-related reasons. This information should be made available to all employees. Posters that you can put in visible places across your business are available at this [US Department of Labor website](#). FFCRA provides businesses with tax credits to cover certain costs of providing employees with required paid sick leave and expanded family and medical leave for reasons related to COVID-19. For more information about how to obtain tax credits to cover these expenses, refer to the IRS publication [COVID-19-Related Tax Credits: General Information FAQs](#).

Along with social distancing at work, other measures can be taken to reduce the spread among employees. Require deliveries be made by one employee rather than a team. Being enclosed in the cab of a truck is conducive to transmittal of the virus. Limit the number of employees present and assign them to specific spaces so they are less likely to interact throughout a shift.

If staff numbers allow, and employees are sufficiently cross trained, rotate in teams. Have Team A work Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and Team B work Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Employees from the same household should be assigned to the same team. Each team cleans and disinfects before leaving. By working in the same team, one infected employee or customer does not have the opportunity to infect the entire staff prior to being diagnosed.

Garden centers commonly have resident pets that help greet customers or staff who bring friendly pets to work. Just as it is best for customers to leave their pets at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, the garden center's pets are best kept away from customers at this time. Animals may not observe social distancing and tempt customers to pet them or congregate around them.

When Things Go Wrong

Customer Complaints

During the COVID-19 pandemic, fears are heightened. Customers may perceive a threat from some practices you are or are not taking and resort to sharing their concerns via social media. Respond to these posts like you would a bad review for your product or services. Consider this [expert guidance on bad reviews](#) from the UT Center for Profitable Agriculture. Take comfort that many more customers are posting positive reviews and accolades for your mitigation efforts.

Contingency Plan

Having a contingency plan is essential, especially for an independently owned garden center that does not have the resources associated with a regional or national network. Key personnel whose responsibilities cannot be shared with the staff at large should practice aggressive social distancing from one another and personally. Have a plan of action if an employee does contract the virus. How will you notify the other employees? Will you close temporarily? If so, for how long? Mobile device applications such as “Remind” can be helpful for quickly communicating with your teams. Will you have accessible sales records to help the health department contact trace your customers? Given the virulence of the disease and its ability to spread prior to symptoms, develop a plan for managing your store if multiple employees become ill simultaneously. What are your priority tasks — irrigation? Can everyone operate a cash register? How many staff members can unlock the doors and open and close the business? In a worst-case scenario, plan for plant care to preserve your inventory.

The Green Industry is fortunate to be considered an essential business in Tennessee. By taking reasonable measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 your garden center can provide a reduced-risk shopping experience for your customers and your staff. If COVID-19 does strike your workforce, you will benefit from having proactively cross-trained your staff and having an established, well-communicated contingency plan, reducing the impact not only to your business but likely your community as well. Initiating online sales can create a new income stream, increasing sales and benefitting your business for the long-term. Operating a business during uncertain times is stressful, but implementing strong mitigation measures can provide some solace and help your business weather the pandemic.

Acknowledgements

A Garden Center Twilight webinar was held on April 23, 2020 inviting garden center operators to join a web conference to ask questions and share ideas to help protect the health of customers and employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you to Stuart Cofer, Cofer's Home and Garden Showplace, who was the featured speaker, and UT Extension specialists from the Department of Plant Sciences (Amy Fulcher), Department of Food Science (Nathan Miller, Mark Morgan) and Center for Profitable Agriculture (Jared Bruhin, Rob Holland, Megan Bruch Leffew, Hal Pepper) along with representatives from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture (Debbie Ball, Keith Harrison) who were available to field questions, identify resources and offer possible solutions. This fact sheet serves as a companion resource to the webinar and is a compilation of ideas shared during the webinar and from other sources.

Disclaimer

This publication was developed in consultation with a number of Cooperative Extension Service and other university-based staff, trade media, and independently owned garden center operators and was developed to serve as a source of information only. It is not intended to provide or replace medical or legal advice. Please refer to local and state regulations in your area for guidance on when you can operate and to what COVID-19 mitigation measures your operation must adhere. Please note the regulations regarding operating during the COVID-19 pandemic, status as an essential business, and knowledge of the virus that causes COVID-19 are constantly changing and may have changed since this document was published.

Sources

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