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Gardeners select plants at Ebert's Garden Center in Santa Cruz

# Nursery Business Blooms Late

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After months of rainy weather and struggling through the slowest winter season in many a year, plant nurseries throughout the area are reaping the benefits of our recent summertime weather.

Waiting in line has become an American pastime at banks and grocery stores. Gardeners are now adding nurseries to that list.

Literally "droves of people" are flocking in, according to Mike Glazier, owner of Mission Garden Center in west Santa Cruz.

Added Ralph Chavis at Ebert's Garden Center on the east side: "The people almost outnumber the amount of flowers. Before we can even get them off the truck to put them away, customers are buying them up."

The sentiment is the same among customers.

"This nice, beautiful weather brought me in," said Joan Lewis of Santa Cruz, who could be seen at Ebert's snapping up vegetable seedlings. "I've gone to three nurseries so far and they're all crawling with people. It looks like a fire sale."

Customer Francis Bunnell of Soquel described the sudden sunny weather as a "restoration" compared to the storm's devastation.

"Our yard had three feet of mud," she said.

"It's finally dried out enough where we can get it out."

The change in weather, explained Brian McFadden of the Santa Cruz Lumber Co. Garden Center, has served to very nearly bypass the nurseries busiest season, spring.

"We've sort of gone from rainy, winter weather to the hot summertime," McFadden told The Sentinel.

That assessment was backed by Lloyd Tenny of Far West Nursery, who explained all nurseries are busy each spring.

"This year, however, has been much more dramatic," he said. "Everything was so wet and muddy even avid gardeners couldn't get much done this winter. Our business has been much more concentrated."

Concurred Chavis: "It's a later start because of the rains. It's normally this way in March. By now, everybody is anxious to get something in."

What are people buying?

"Anything and everything," said a smiling Tenny from dry good fertilizers to full-sized trees.

A general assessment from an informal Sentinel survey, however, showed annual summer flowers like petunias and marigolds setting the pace along with summer vegetables like tomatoe and squash.

Last summer's Mediterranean fruit fly scare has all but disappeared, according to

nursery spokesmen. Customers have been snatching up fruit trees and other fruit-bearing plants despite the threat of stripping their trees because of the Medfly.

What with soaring sales at retail nurseries, the wholesale business is also coming up smelling like roses.

"The phone is ringing off the hook with people wanting to buy," said Dick Hartman of Tiedemann Wholesale Nursery in Soquel. "About the only thing that is disappointing is that it took until the end of April to happen. Typically, we're busy from the middle of February."

Hartman described this winter's overabundance of rain as being "tougher on us than the drought years of 1976-77." Not only were home gardeners grounded indoors, but even commercial landscapers couldn't do much work, he said.

Orders have doubled, according to Welby Clinton at huge Leonard Coates Wholesale Nurseries in Watsonville. It serves California and parts of Oregon and Nevada.

Despite the surge in business, both nursery retailers and wholesalers don't know whether it is going to be enough to make up for the devastating winter.

"I just hope it's as sunny the next four months as it was rainy the last four months," concluded Hartman.

Gardeners are hoping the same thing.