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Delmar Cockrum pinches off the old flower heads on flats of marigolds at his Livonia market.

JIM JAGGELD/staff photographer

Planting time

Cool, wet weather slows sales

Impatiens, begonias, tomatoes and peppers.

Those are the big sellers to do-it-yourself home landscapers and gardeners this spring according to a survey of plant suppliers.

Some also reported that unusually spotty weather the past several weeks — rain, cool spells and wind — has resulted in slower sales than previous planting seasons.

"The lousy weather hurt everyone, I think," said Delmar Cockrum, who owns a flower-vegetable plant stand in Livonia with his wife, Lena. "I know it's slowed our sales down here."

"Sales are just a little bit later," said Carol McCreedy, a member of the family that has operated Clyde Smith & Sons, a Westland landmark, for decades.

Ken Dabelstein, owner of Ken's Country Produce in Westland, reported that his sales volume is down very slightly, 3 percent or less.

"Two good days can make it back to normal," he added.

Other nurseries reported no downturn in sales.

Business at the Frank's Nursery in Livonia has been steady, said Steve Petro, an assistant manager.

"WHEN IT'S rainy and cold, you have nothing," he said. "When it's sunny, sharks are wanting to get out there."

"We're actually up over last year a little bit," said Lynn Arft, owner of The Plant Station in Birmingham. "We're finding more and more growers all the time. We try harder to find a niche, to push a little more volume up."

Galen Eickenberry, nursery manager at Joe Randazzo's Fruit and Vegetables in Westland, said business has increased there during its second year of operation.

"We're a little better known," he

'Two good days can make it back to normal.'

— Ken Dabelstein
plant retailer

said. "Last year we didn't have a lot of nursery stock."

Plus, some buyers came out to Westland after Randazzo's stopped selling plants at its Redford store, Eickenberry said.

REGARDLESS of individual income statements, flowers now outnumber vegetable sales by better than a 4-1 margin, suppliers agree.

There's less sunny space available for vegetables as housing tracts and trees grow, they said.

Delmar Cockrum made another observation.

"The younger generation is getting lazier. That's the big thing. Oldtimers still want a big garden. Younger ones don't want to bother with it."

"People just don't have time for vegetables gardens like they used to," said David Smith, an owner of Clyde Smith.

"Lots are smaller, people don't have room," McCreedy added.

But Pei-o sees a slight increase in the number of younger people growing vegetables.

"I think it's the pesticide scare. People want to know what they're eating."

"WITH PRICES on the rise, people are doing their own canning," he added. "Younger people are

starting to get in on it. A lot of it is word-of-mouth."

The tomato, a traditional favorite, still is number one in the hearts of vegetable gardeners.

"It's easy to raise and you get a lot for the work and the space it takes up," Eickenberry said.

Zucchini also was popular at The Plant Station, peppers at Randazzo's, peppers and cucumbers at Ken's.

Impatiens and begonias, colorful shade plants with partial sun possibilities, are the flowers of choice this year.

Impatiens alone account for more than a third of his flower-vegetable business, Arft said.

"You can't keep them," Eickenberry said. "As fast as they come off the truck, they snatch them."

HERB GARDENS seem to be gaining in popularity, Arft and Dabelstein observed. "Cooking herbs really are in high demand," Arft said.

It still isn't too late to plant a garden. Most suppliers plan to keep vegetables on hand through the middle of this month, flowers to the end of the month and some flowers throughout the season.

Bargains can be had by some late-season shoppers. Other suppliers say they don't expect to have much stock left by June's end.

Cockrum has no sympathy for latecomers, saying he'd rather dump plants than offer deep discounts.

"I always hope those cheap-skates don't get a bargain," he said.

But Arft takes a contrary view, saying he eventually offers to give away the remnants of his vegetable plants late in the season.

Business tails off for firms seeking China connection

By R.J. King
special writer

China may be breathing a sigh of relief now that Congress has extended most favored nation tariff status for another year, but the mood among area business managers and scholars is far from optimistic.

A year after Chinese soldiers killed hundreds of pro-democracy students and workers in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, business remains abysmal and the tourism industry has all but collapsed.

"What we see today is that two faces have developed in China," said Richard Stamps, associate professor of anthropology and coordinator of East-Asian studies at Oakland University.

"At the top you have very strong political leaders who have everything to lose and little to gain by encouraging democratic reforms. Their response to the Tiananmen Square demonstrations a year ago was to come out with guns blazing."

"On the other hand, the average



Richard Stamps noticed cutbacks

Chinese is a peasant who is far removed from the political arena of

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Tread carefully, academics urge

While the speed is often difficult to gauge, China continues to modernize its economy, ushering in a rising standard of living while developing targeted sectors of agriculture, industry, science, technology and defense.

For area companies active in China, or those holding out future prospects of doing business there, several state and local resources can provide familiarity with the market, expertise in language and government ties.

At the top of the list is the Michigan Department of Commerce, which in conjunction with Schoolcraft College in Livonia, provides product evaluation and expertise in exporting through the Community Export Alliance Office.

In addition, several universities, including Oakland University, Michigan State University and the University of Michigan, provide international expertise through related business programs.

"There is a lot of potential in long-term growth in China," said Richard Stamps, an associate professor of anthropology and the coordinator of the East-Asian studies at Oakland University. "One billion people are not going to go away."

"But if you go to sell toothbrushes, it's not going to work. I would advise any company attempting to do business to be careful, do the research, be sure the product is something they need and can pay for, and it's in

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