

# Sun-Sentinel

## BUSINESS & MONEY

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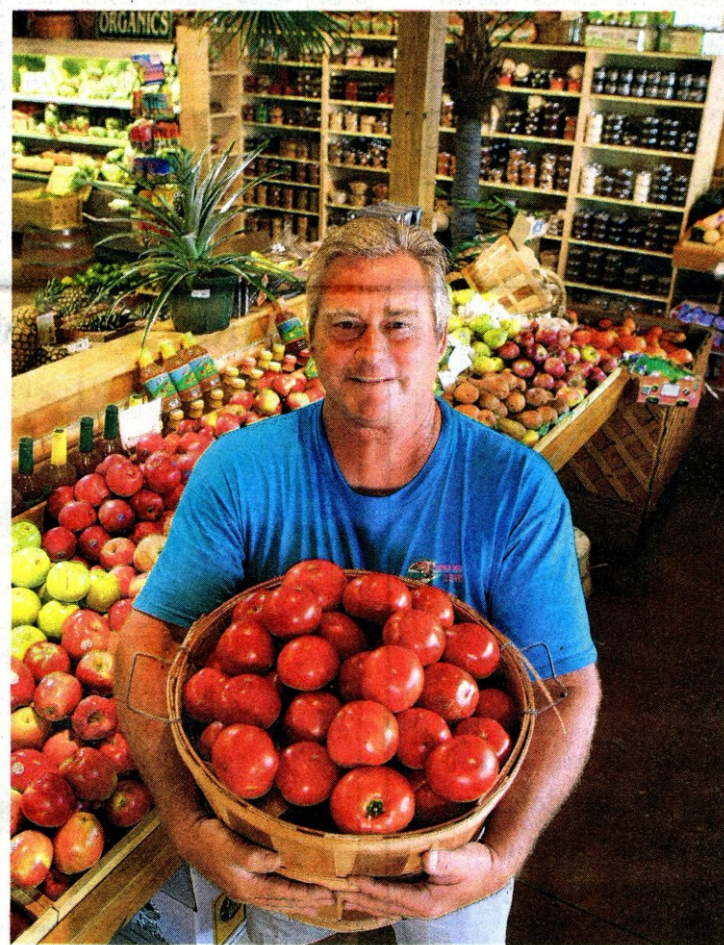
### Nurseries get creative to grow more business

By Christina Veiga

It takes more than pretty plants to stay in the nursery business.

Today's nursery farmers spend less time getting their hands dirty in the field, and more time thinking about marketing, science and consumer behavior.

At Flamingo Road Nursery in Davie, that means luring in customers with novelty items like double-yolk eggs at an on-site farmer's market.



At The Jungle Nursery in Homestead, that means taking a high-tech approach to growing and getting creative to develop a one-of-a-kind planting pot.

At Costa Farms, based in South Miami-Dade County, that means more research to develop better plants, and marketing to keep consumers interested.

It's hard to imagine South Florida without nurseries. There are more than 1,500 nurseries in Miami-Dade alone. Some of the largest nurseries, such as Manuel Diaz Farms in South Dade, cultivate tens of thousands of acres and have millions in sales. Small nurseries may cultivate smaller acres, with sales of \$100,000 or less.

David Peyton, president of First National Bank of South Florida, based in South Miami-Dade, said the industry is the bank's largest customer.

"I can't minimize the value of the nursery business. It's really been good for the bank," he said.

But the industry hasn't been immune to the slumping economy.

In 2005, total industry output in Florida was \$10.39 billion, according to a study by the food and resource economic department of the University of Florida. The industry employed about 11,700 in Miami-Dade and about 1,100 in Broward, according to the same study.

By 2008, industry output dropped to \$8.9 billion, according to another study by the department. In 2008, the industry employed less than half of the workforce it did before the recession: 5,000 in Miami-Dade and only 300 in Broward, according to the 2008 study, the most recent available.

Here's a look at what one grower is doing to keep the business alive:

Owner Jim Dezell doesn't just wait for customers to come to Flamingo Road Nursery in Davie. He gives them reasons to come.

Lots of reasons.

Sure, there are all the standard plants and flowers usually found at nurseries. But the 10-acre mega garden center, just south of Interstate 595, also features a farmer's market and deli, a gift shop with thousands of items, free gardening classes and festivals throughout the year. They were all planned when the center opened in 2005, but weren't added until a few years later.

"We've had to get creative [about] offering more than just plants," Dezell said.

It's working.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, Olga Stroud walked through the center with a bag of groceries from the market. Her 9-year-old daughter, Kathryn, slurped on a milkshake, also from the market. They pushed a small cart holding a pink flower,

seed packets and some pots because Kathryn wants to take up gardening, her mom said.

Stroud, who lives in Cooper City, said she chooses Flamingo Road Nursery over big-box retail stores such as Lowe's or Home Depot because it offers a little bit of everything.

"It's a totally different vibe," she said. "It's nice to come here not just when you want something for the house, but the farmer's market is excellent as well."

On weekends, cars park on the grass and in the neighboring church lot when the nursery's own parking lot is full. And once the customers are there, Dezell works to keep them.

Even the layout of the center has been carefully planned: the open-air gift shop flows into the shaded plants area, with prearranged pots of foliage that customers can "grab-and-go," Dezell said. About 400 feet of covered walkways keep shoppers out of South Florida's brutal sun, making strolling around the nursery more enjoyable.

Dezell also managed to turn the hottest — and slowest — summer months into some of the most profitable. The center invites summer campers to visit the on-site butterfly garden, and then sends the children home with coupons for their parents. October, once the worst month for the business, has turned into one of the most profitable with a fall festival featuring a pumpkin patch and hayrides.

Then there's the farmer's market.

Jackie Chambers, who lives in Boca Raton, stopped by the store on her way to a friend's house. She was there for one thing: Dezell's hydroponically-grown tomatoes. That's a big compliment, Chambers said, because she grew up in New Jersey, a state known for particularly yummy tomatoes.

"The ones in the grocery store don't taste so good," said Chambers.