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AGRICULTURE

South Florida's plant business wilts in weak market

Nursery owners' fortunes have dried up with the housing market, so they are scrambling to find alternatives or otherwise stay afloat.

By Georgia Tasker

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Dean Richardson's 10-acre nursery, Tropical Treescapes in South Miami-Dade County, used to supply flowering trees and palms for home landscapes. Now his trees are languishing while, with Gina Melin, he's growing vegetables in a shade house and selling to chefs as well as the Coral Gables Farmers' Market.

"We sold all the lettuce, beets and carambolas. We almost sold out of Swiss chard and pak choi," he said after his first venture to the Saturday morning event. "The only thing that didn't do well is radishes."

Growers of landscape trees and shrubs in South Florida saw their business plunge with the crash of the housing market. To stay afloat, many have turned to new crops, planted less, plundered their retirement fund or even thrown crops away.

In the Redland, Sylvia Gordon, whose nurseries provide plants for her company Landscape by Sylvia, has developed a line of herbs and heirloom vegetables.

"The concept was to sell to landscapers who could install the plants in high-end homes where they like fresh vegetables and herbs," she said. 'I sell them as 'landscape-ready' -- a finished tomato plant with fruit already on it, or herbs ready to cut. I go through brokers who have those kinds of clientele."

Her traditional landscape plants, like begonias and irises, are "very, very slow."

Companies that do landscape design and installation are faced with the same problems as growers. Debra DeMarco, whose landscape design company is D.D.M. Horticultural Services, often designs gardens and provides colorful plants for high-end clients. She is using Gordon's vegetables to create coral rock-edged vegetable beds, "adding radishes, lettuces, dwarf bananas. We made a power buy of citrus from Central Florida, and we're trying to do all kinds of vegetable things."

In contrast, the Arazoza Brothers handle big contracts, installing landscaping for government jobs, Midtown Miami and Sawgrass Mills mall as well as the rebuilt aviary at Metrozoo. They

have loaders, backhoes, tractor-trailers and a little more than 200 acres of nursery in Miami and Palm Beach County.

"We've got work, but the backlog is slowing down and it's harder to get new work," said Alberto Arazoza. "Prices are back to what they were 10 years ago or worse."

"The problem is basically most of the nurseries down here were closely tied to development," said Eddie Cequerella, who owns the 60-acre Real Trees Farm in South Miami-Dade County. "When there are no homes or golf courses being built, there's no need for our product."

"The landscape business is down considerably," said Ben Bolusky, executive director of the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association in Orlando. "You're going to see a number of firms get stronger and a number probably disappear."

Throughout the county, the landscape nurseries, like the indoor plant nurseries, are turning to new crops, trimming staff and trying to hang on.

One tree farm owner, who didn't want his name used "because it will hurt my business even more," said, "We could not be doing worse. We don't sell anything. Our sales are down 95 percent from what we sold the past few years."

Cequerella, who came to the United States from Cuba 44 years ago, said he went into the landscape business after high school.

"There was a slowdown then (in 1983 or '84) and again after Hurricane Andrew. I remember that in 1974 there was a problem. But I've never seen anything like this. I've talked to people all the way from Jacksonville to Homestead," he said.

"When hardly anything is moving, you cut your losses. I myself have thrown away palms. Others are throwing away oak trees and tabebuias. I've seen nurseries throwing away beautiful royal palms. A few years ago, they were worth \$450 to \$600. Today there is no demand, and everyone's got them."

At the peak of the building boom, Cequerella said he'd sell about 2,000 plants a month, everything from ground covers to 30-foot palms. Very little other than shrubs for hedges is selling now, he said.

'A LOT OF BROKERING'

"I do a lot of brokering," he said. "I'm buying material for 40 to 30 cents on the dollar. People are desperate. People ask me, 'What can you pay?' They're trying to get jobs and underbidding."

The economic downturn was preceded by water restrictions that slowed sales, said Sandy Stein, owner of the Jungle Nursery.

Nursery plants didn't die due to lack of water, but homeowners "had a complete lack of confidence about whether they could keep their plants alive" and didn't buy new plants, he said. The water restrictions, in fact, do *not* apply to newly planted trees and shrubs, which can be watered six days a week for the first 30 days after planting, then four days a week for the next 30 days.

Despite its name, the Jungle Nursery was built on the sale of five plants that were shipped to dry states like Arizona, Nevada and Texas: pygmy date and queen palms, European fan palms, the pindo palm and Japanese blueberries.

Now there's a glut of pygmy date and queen palms "that has driven the price into the ground," Stein said. "So I had to redefine myself as a grower of unique items."

As an example, he said, Jamaica caper, a native plant, is usually grown and sold as a shrub, but he is growing them as standard trees.

In addition, he has changed soil on some plants to save money, cut down on chemicals and bought pots in bulk.

Many of the landscape plants sold at Home Depot and Lowe's come from the 250-acre Nature's Way nursery owned by Dawn Wilson. Business was down 10 percent last year, she said, and she predicts it will be off 20 percent this year.

While not cutting prices, Wilson said, "we're not planting as many plants. We've reduced labor and office people . . . basically everything to go along with what we are expecting."

Instead of outsourcing some plants, like India hawthorn and ferns, Wilson has been growing more of her own inventory.

MULTI-TASKING

Phil Prellezo, owner of Philcorp, a landscape contracting business that does the actual planting for landscape architects and developers, has begun to do some of his own designs. He's also growing hedge plants to replace ficus hedges that have been denuded by the ficus whitefly. "I have jobs I'll be doing a year from now, and I know I'll be using them."

DeMarco, like everyone else, is trying to be cheerful.

"People are very cautious," she said. "People are discussing projects, but they're in a wait-and-see mode. I think in spring people will feel better. We work for two or three big builders, and they're in the same mode: contracts pending. We're trying to be as optimistic as we can."