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Alison Harbough -The Capital

Dennis Skaggs, left, owner of the Severn Grove Landscape company, and Kara Mingo, owner of Annapolis-based Good Earth Gardeners, remove weeds and cut back grasses in a client's yard in Crownsville.

Green businesses ready for climb in temps, sales

By GRANT HUANG and KATIE ARCIERI Staff Writers

This month marks the beginning of Kara Mingo's "pulling-my-hair-out crazy time."

The owner of Good Earth Gardeners in Annapolis said her sales blossom through mid-June, then taper off until the third week in September, when she gets ready to install fall plants.

But April is the time to remove weeds, cut back grasses and re-edge flower beds for "spring cleanup jobs."

Ms. Mingo estimates that she puts down an average of 10 yards of mulch per job, which range in price from \$600 to \$800.

"Really, they are a financial boon," said Ms. Mingo, an award-winning gardener.

Now that warmer weather has arrived, nurseries and landscapers around the county are gearing up for the first wave of sales.

"We're gearing up big-time," said Craig Hudson, owner of Evergreen Gene's Garden Center in Glen Burnie. "We've got tractor-trailers coming in every day."

Every week, as many as eight 18-wheelers from places like Oregon and Tennessee stop by the little shop off Crain Highway to drop off thousands of flowers and plants.

Mr. Hudson, whose family took over the store from its previous owners 30 years ago, estimated that more than 50 percent of sales take place between mid-March and mid-June.

All it takes is a steady stretch of warm weather and sunny skies to open the floodgates.

It's the same story at Himmel's Farm & Garden in Pasadena, where a tractor-trailer was unloading bags of mulch last week.

"This year (major sales) are getting started a little later, after all that ice and snow," said Dottie Snyder, general manager. "It depends on Mother Nature. But it's going get very busy, very soon."

About 75 percent of sales at Himmel's take place from March through May, according to Steve Watkins, who took over the 40-year-old family-owned nursery in 1979.

Under his ownership, it has grown to include 2 acres of stock and three greenhouses with 10,000 square feet of space.

"We started getting deliveries in February, but most of the nursery stock is wintered over in the greenhouses," Ms. Snyder said.

The greenhouses hold hybrid plants like "knockout roses," which have been bred to resist disease and bloom from spring until late fall, Mr. Watkins said.

"They're getting very popular now," he said. "But people buy a mix of everything."

The disadvantage of hybrid plants is the increased cost, Mr. Hudson said.

"The consumer is getting a little more educated when it comes to these hybrids," he said. "But they're patented ... and they're more limited in supply, which makes them more expensive."

Ms. Mingo said she has lined up seven landscaping jobs since late February. On the gardening side of her business, she has seen interest in "native habitat" gardens that include such shrubs as blueberry bushes, whose white flowers bloom in the spring and attract birds. She's also planning

a garden design for a home in Hillsmere that incorporates fennel and parsley in a bed of disease-resistant roses.

Ms. Mingo said this garden provides an opportunity to watch the entire butterfly life cycle. Swallowtail butterflies lay eggs on the herbs and caterpillars hatch.

"I've seen the butterflies with wings wet as they are coming out of the pupa," she said.

Another springtime trend is the increasing popularity of landscaping services, Mr. Hudson said.

Bryan Owen, who founded Owen Lawn and Landscaping five years ago, agreed.

"A lot more people are busy with work and they don't have time to (garden) themselves, especially if they have kids," he said.

As a result, his Pasadena-based business - which started out as a one-man operation - has nearly tripled, handling up to 100 houses a week during the peak months of March, April and May.

"When the cold weather breaks, the phone starts ringing," said Mr. Owen said, who relies on Himmel's to supply mulch, topsoil and a wide variety of plants.

Environmentally friendly customers also are fueling profits.

Dennis Skaggs, owner of the Annapolis-based Severn Grove Landscape company, which installs designs for Good Earth Gardeners, said customers looking for his "eco-friendly" services have helped business increase by roughly 15 percent each year. He said his business doesn't "use chemicals on anything we do" and tries to use native plants whenever possible.

"Customers just like what I'm about," Mr. Skaggs said. "People are becoming more aware about what's going on around them."

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