

Media release for the Garden Centre Association

Good weather helps ignite BBQ and other sales in May

THE RECENT warm weather helped members of the Garden Centre Association (GCA) boost their sales of barbecues and garden furniture last month (May, 2014) according to the body's Barometer of Trade (BoT).

The results out on June 16, which are the only official GCA May trading figures to be released, highlighted that furniture and barbecue sales were up 23.4% compared to the same month in 2013.

Will Armitage, Chairman of the GCA, explained: "Overall our member garden centres had a good May, busier than anticipated with the weather playing a vital part in their successes. All categories were up on the year to date, which is also very encouraging.

"As well as furniture and barbecues, the other categories that saw significant increases during the month were hard landscaping, which was up by 11.12%, pets and aquatics up by 7.79%, clothing up by 7.89%, gifts by 7.02% and catering by 5.64%."

The GCA BoT reports are compiled using actual sales figures and provide an up-to-date trading position statement. They are made available mid-month following the end of the prior month after all member garden centres have submitted their results.

The reports allow members to compare their trading positions with other centres.

Philip Gass, Finance & Marketing Director for Creative Gardens in Northern Ireland, said: "We've had a good year for furniture and barbecues generally, and as usual it is probably down to a combination of factors. The weather has been good most of this year – we haven't had the snow or bad weather in Northern Ireland that we got last year, and May was particularly good with generally mild and dry weather, possibly meaning people getting more use of their outdoor space and more willing to invest in new furniture or an upgraded barbeque.

"We've made a conscious effort this year to select ranges that are harder to compare online and differ from our local competitors, and where we've found the comparable models we have been able to compete by adding value in the form of a loyalty points bonus or including things like gas cans or covers. We have given more space to outdoor living this year, which has certainly helped sales. We've seen a particularly good increase at our Bushmills centre, which has seen like for like barbeque sales in May 2014 increase by 350% on May 2013."

Meanwhile, things have been hotting up in the Westcountry too.

General Manager for Trelawney@Wadebridge and Trelawney@Ashford garden centres in Cornwall and Devon respectively, Peter Burks said: “Sales of furniture and barbecues at both of our centres were well up on last year, and were better than the last three years. I think the good summer last year is still helping as well as the good weather now. This trend has continued well into June with the current hot spell seeing massive increases in barbecue sales.”

Some garden centres have also reported that this year they have geared up for better sales and have put greater effort into their barbecue sections, and that this has paid off.

Peter Self, Managing Director of Whitehall Garden Centre near Chippenham, Wiltshire, explained: “Our sales increases are due to a number of things: having a dedicated Weber concept area, a large range of associated accessories and dedicated staffing at peak periods. We also held a Weber cookery demo evening in May that stimulated a great deal of interest and encouraged further sales. Additionally, we have added Jamie Oliver and Landsman barbecues to our range for the 2014 season as promotional lines and these are proving popular too.”

Some member garden centres have been working hard on promoting their membership of the GCA and their award wins and they feel this has helped with improving footfall this year.

Nigel Wait, Managing Director at Newbridge Nurseries in Horsham, said: “We had a very good May. As far as the garden centre figures go, which do not include our restaurant, May was up 8% on last year, which also makes it 30% up year to date. Mirroring the GCA findings, the following categories were up for us in May: garden furniture 49%, gifts 26% and barbecues 18%.

“We have seen a big footfall increase during the past few months, which is continuing throughout June. I think this is for two reasons. Firstly, the success of our restaurant Stooks, people are fed up with the same old food that everyone has to offer. People are coming to actually dine in Stooks, not just eating while they are here, and that has had a big impact on our business. The second reason is I used our success as a GCA award-winner to maximum effect throughout the county early on in the season and that has paid off. We were declared as the country’s Most Improved Garden Centre 2013/2014 by the GCA in January. Having a GCA award really does improve your reputation and it was a real asset when it came to gaining publicity and promoting ourselves.”

GCA garden centres are now also working harder to deliver catering excellence, customer service to match and all within a relaxing environment.

Fellow director Jane Wait, who looks after Newbridge’s restaurant, Stooks, said: “Our May figures are up by 27% and year to date figures up by 30%. Our restaurant Stooks is different to the run of the mill catering operations as it has a Middle Eastern and Mediterranean influenced menu and the food is locally sourced, and very fresh. A selection of unusual salads, using many fresh herbs and spices, are on display daily. Menu items are cooked to order and a ‘house’ bread is offered for all sandwiches, which is baked in our kitchen along with all the delicious cakes displayed.

“Our success is definitely based on customer satisfaction, the ambience we have created with our beautiful, sunny south facing patio and our polite, friendly, hard-working customer-

focused staff, who are all barista trained, many making coffees using latte art. Today's garden centre customer has very high standards when it comes to refreshments and cuisine and it's our job to deliver."

When it comes to gift sales, many member garden centres say that it's down to the personality and expertise of the buyer, and creativity with displays.

Martin Davies, Managing Director at Raglan Garden Centre in Wales said: "Our giftware buyer Julie Mills-Gardiner has created a great ambience this year with her mix of traditional and eclectic gift ranges for 2014. Year to date figures show an increase of 21%, with May coming in even better at plus 25%.

"What can we put this down to? Well we have two distinct areas, the main shop gift continues to grab as much space as it can for traditional giftware with the addition of large ceramics and glass for that clean European look. Our second area is located next to the restaurant within our Interiors Department where we offer the perfect solution for the 'spring clean' brigade. New ranges of themed table linen, cushions, lighting and in particular pictures are giving us very good increases. Every available wall space, including the restaurant walls, is taken up with framed prints selling for as much as £250 each, this was dead space that now produces a seriously good return. Finally, I must add that Julie can go out on a limb sometimes and I was very thankful we found buyers for the authentic Indian cinema seat benches at £400 each and the Hawaiian bamboo bar she purchased!"

For further information, please call 0118 930 8918. Alternatively, please visit www.gca.org.uk, log on to www.facebook.com/pages/GardenCentreAssociation or follow the organisation on Twitter at www.twitter.com/GC_Association.

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For further media details, please call Porcupine PR on 01278 446801 or email Rachel@porcupinepr.co.uk. Alternatively, please contact Iain Wylie, GCA Chief Executive on 07843 633408 or email Iain@gca.org.uk.

Photograph caption: Generic GCA member garden centre, summer shot.



