

Defeated Quarantine Gardeners Are Throwing in the Trowel

Heirloom tomatoes and needlepoint seemed like fun early in the pandemic, but now, not so much; 'I think I'm done making yogurt and baking sourdough'

[Valerie Bauerlein](#) – September 16, 2020

Thousands of quarantined Americans planted vegetables last spring, striking a blow for hope just as their World War II-era forebears did with home-front Victory Gardens.

Six months later, many are admitting defeat.

"My tomatoes look like a Dr. Seuss plant," said Doni Chamberlain, a 64-year-old blogger in Redding, Calif. "It might not have helped that I planted them in a kiddie pool."

She netted three tomatoes, enough for "the world's smallest, most pathetic caprese salad."

If spring was a time for new beginnings in a changed world, fall is shaping up as a time to decide what to keep and what to throw out. It's not just gardens. It's unfinished puzzles and half-done scarfs, dusty bread makers and unopened sacks of dry beans.

Ms. Chamberlain hit the trifecta of defeat: shriveled garden, unused sewing machine and homemade extract that tasted "more like vodka than vanilla."

"I had the best of intentions," she said. "I can admit that I failed."

There are signs that pandemic-era Americans have moved on from creating things that are good but fleeting, to projects meant for the long haul.



The fruits of Ms. Chamberlain's labor: enough tomatoes for 'the world's smallest, most pathetic caprese salad.'

Photo: Doni Chamberlain

Yeast sales are up 82% year-over-year for the week that ended Aug. 29, a healthy clip but a fraction of the 647% spike in the week that ended March 21, according to market research firm Nielsen.

Journalist Susan Orlean recently tweeted to her 379,000 followers: “I think I’m done making yogurt and baking sourdough.” She also said she was over dyeing her roots and working jigsaw puzzles.

One follower replied that she bought a 50-pound bag of flour and made zero loaves of bread. Another encouraged her to make wine instead, given she likely would have time.

This month, Silicon Valley hardware engineer Rob Hastings said he felt a twinge when he went to Craigslist and listed his still-in-the-box Flowbee, billed as “the best vacuum haircutting system on the market.”

He had patted himself on the back last March for remembering the Flowbee infomercial of his youth, with a man holding a mirror in one hand and cutting his hair with a vacuum attachment in the other.



Rob Hastings had no takers for a hairdo from his Flowbee, billed as ‘the best vacuum haircutting system on the market.’

Photo: Rob Hastings

Mr. Hastings said he had hoped to play barber for his wife, teenage daughter, college-aged son and his son's girlfriend, all quarantined at the Hastings home in Saratoga, Calif. "I kept reminding my family about it, but nobody seemed to be interested," he said.

The younger family members grew their hair out instead, he said.

Around the time he posted "Flowbee-Never Used-\$80," on Craigslist, he used the site to find two used ergonomic office chairs, which he said was emblematic of his second wave of pandemic purchases.

"People are realizing this could go on for another nine months," he said.

Mike Frisch, a 34-year-old community organizer with a New York City education nonprofit, waited a month last spring for an in-demand exercise pull-up bar. He said he never figured out how to install it.

He listed it for \$15 on Facebook Marketplace as soon as gyms reopened. "I figured I'd try to rejoin the world as much as I can," Mr. Frisch said.

At American Jewelry and Loan in Detroit, buyers have gone from seeking videogame consoles in April and May to power tools in August and September, according to Les Gold, the founder and president.

"When everybody was stuck at home, we sold out of all our TVs," said Mr. Gold, who formerly starred in the reality show "Hardcore Pawn."

"Now everybody is 'Tim the Tool Man,' " he said, referring to Tim Allen's character on "Home Improvement."

Retailers say demand remains high for some products related to past times, such as musical instruments and jigsaw puzzles.

Sweetwater Sound in Fort Wayne, Ind., is still doing "close to Black Friday and Cyber Monday sales every day now," with sales up 40% from this time last year, according to founder Chuck Surack.

Mr. Surack said he knows some pandemic hobbies lack staying power, for example, the \$150 air fryer he used three times or his wife's lightly used bread maker.

"I don't mean anything about bread, I like bread," he said. "But improving yourself with an instrument, that lasts a little longer."

Filip Francke, chief executive of Ravensburger North America, a division of German puzzle giant Ravensburger AG, said sales are up 80% year-over-year, with inventory starting to catch up to demand. Puzzle sales were up 370% in the month ended April 15.

He said the most popular pandemic puzzles feature travel destinations or the comforting illustrations of the “Cozy” series. “It’s your cottage by the lake, it’s your ‘she’ shack in the back of the garden,” he said. “All these moments that you long for.’

Mr. Francke said he expects steady sales growth as the weather turns cold and families seek to connect at home. “The demand for quality puzzle experience is still infinite,” he said.

In small-town Michigan, Molly Harper said she was sanguine about setting aside neglected needlepoint projects and jigsaw puzzles after two missing-piece “exercises in frustration.”

Those hobbies gave her a sense of control she needs less now than she did in the pandemic’s early chaos, she said. “We’ve gotten to the point that this is everyday life,” said Ms. Harper, a paranormal-romance novelist known for “Peace, Blood and Understanding” and “How to Date Your Dragon.”

She said she is disappointed that the family’s Victory Garden was a bust. “It’s just embarrassing,” she said. “Everything looks dead.”



Green-bean plants named after characters from ‘The Office.’
Photo: Molly Harper

Ms. Harper’s family tended the garden together daily, including in the cold Michigan spring as they planted seeds in cardboard boxes in the family room and tiptoed around them for months.

Her children named green-bean plants after characters from “The Office,” with Jim Halpert as the tallest, Pam Beesly as the plant leaning toward Jim, and Andy Bernard, the “Nard Dog,” doing his own thing in the corner.

Now? “Big Tuna and the gang aren’t doing too well,” she said.

The squash were eaten by deer. She said she realized too late that onions were best planted in winter.

A rare survivor was the hardy jalapeño, a cruel twist because Ms. Harper said “no one in my family likes spicy food.”

Still, the family plans to try again in the spring. “It’s not quite a defeat garden,” Ms. Harper said. “It’s an ‘I learned something’ garden.”

Write to Valerie Bauerlein at valerie.bauerlein@wsj.com