

# Seize this early-spring opportunity

**W**hen you look into the detail of the prime minister's road map out of lockdown, the steps outlined for March and April are really favourable towards encouraging the Great British public to get out into their gardens. As we have all witnessed recently, people have been quick to make a start on preparing their gardens for spring as the weather has improved.

Much was said last year about the mental and physical well-being benefits that gardens can bring, and this cannot be underestimated at a time like this. Having been in full lockdown for nearly two months, it's no surprise that people are keen to spend more time outside—many are battle-weary and feeling the effects of cabin fever after spending so much time indoors at home. The rise in the number of people posting about their countryside walks or how the bulbs are springing up has



been really noticeable on social media lately.

It is likely that garden centres will see a big jump in customers over the next few weeks, much higher than a typical March. With choices still limited as to how people can spend their time, many will turn to their gardens again. As an example, in 2019 Visit England estimated that nearly 7.5 million Brits took some form of holiday over Easter. But for 2021 the story is very different.

Under the prime minister's plan,

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UK holiday accommodation cannot reopen until at least 12 April, the same date as outdoor hospitality. With non-essential shops also remaining closed until the same date, but the “stay at home” order being lifted on 29 March, garden centres and DIY retailers are likely to see really strong demand.

It has also been reported that restrictions and lockdowns have seen UK consumers push well over £100bn into their savings, so some may well be looking to treat themselves this spring. Let's hope the weather has taken note.

It feels like the outdoor living

categories such as barbecues and furniture could be in for a particularly strong start to the season. From 29 March, groups of up to six people will be allowed in gardens again—and many will be keen to do just that. Gardens will be at the centre of people's socialising.

Obviously, the outlook for garden centre restaurants and coffee shops is much more difficult. One of the biggest questions facing centres now is deciding whether an outdoor-only table-service offer from 12 April is viable until full reopening can take place on 17 May.

Now more than ever, making the most of the early-spring season will be really important for garden centres. The rest of the year may become tougher as customers direct their time and money towards other activities that have been off limits for so long. ■

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