



March 20, 2020

Governor Charles Baker
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street # 280
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker:

As we all come to grips with the immediate impacts of COVID-19, we are also beginning to understand the new reality we must live in. As with any industry serving the public in these trying times, our members are committed to working proactively with local, state and federal officials to mitigate the impact and strive to keep the public safe and healthy. While Massachusetts has not pursued this path, there has been discussion regarding the possibility of asking “non-essential” retail operations to shut their doors for a period of time, with the intent of minimizing exposure to the virus.

The small, family-owned businesses that comprise the Massachusetts agricultural, horticultural and floricultural industry are fully in support of sensible steps public health officials may deem necessary to combat COVID-19. Having said that, we strongly urge public officials at all levels of government to consider garden retailers among those retail operations determined to be “essential” and allow these business owners the option to stay open as a public service. According to the most recent United States Department of Agriculture census, wholesale floriculture and nursery production constitutes 29.8% of cash receipts for agricultural crops in Massachusetts. There are over 10 million square feet of greenhouse space in Massachusetts, and over 50,000 employed in the environmental horticultural and floricultural sectors. Investments in perishable plant material for the spring season are well into the tens of millions of dollars statewide. Beyond the economic importance of these agricultural operations, member businesses may be one of the best ways to combat the “next shoe to drop”: food insecurity as our reliance on external food sources becomes further strained.

Even with a fully-robust food system, Massachusetts food production only accounts for between 5 to 12% of the food its citizens consume! Many of our largest fruit and vegetable producers wholesale across New England, meaning even that production will sparingly find its way to Massachusetts markets. On the bright side, Americans are resilient and resourceful in the face of adversity, provided the opportunity to produce their own food and manage any shortage in the supply chain. This is not unprecedented. During World War II, Victory Gardens provided not just a mental and physical outlet for children, families and communities during those stressful times, but also a source of fresh fruits and vegetables at a time when fuel and supplies were being rationed. Tens of thousands of Massachusetts residents across the Commonwealth already engage in food production at home, and more are sure to follow as the COVID-19 crisis unfolds.

Massachusetts Nursery & Landscape Association, Inc.
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Garden centers carry a variety of agricultural products essential to home food production, including seeds, soil and edible plants. Additionally, they carry necessary tools and supplies, such as starter kits. Together they are essential to maintaining a healthy living environment; one that is critical to sustain even in the midst of this crisis. In many communities, the garden retailer may be the only outlet where consumers have access to essential supplies for growing, gardening, maintaining or repairing their residences. More than simply beautification, horticulture and floriculture are going to improve our environment and our quality of life.

In closing, we stand with you as an industry. We have followed and will continue to follow the guidance of the CDC and state officials in order to protect our customers and our employees. We simply ask that, given the pivotal nature of our work and its importance to the community, you as policymakers consider garden retailers among those operations determined to be essential retail outlets, allowing our members to exercise the option to remain open to support their struggling communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Mezitt', with a large, stylized initial 'P'.

Peter Mezitt
MNLA President

Cc:

Lt. Governor Karyn Polito

EOEEA Secretary Kathleen Theoharides

Commissioner of the MA Department of Agricultural Resources, John Lebeaux