



B • E • A • D • S

R.I. company cashes in on demand for beads as part of latest toy fad

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BEADERY BABIES ARE BIG business these days at Green Plastics in Hope Valley, R.I., where the firm has been making plastic beads for crafts, jewelry, toys, and games for longer than employees there can remember.

Beads sales have skyrocketed in recent months because both children and adults across the country have jumped onto a fad involving stringing plastic beads onto cords and fashioning them into geckos, dragonflies,



ROBERT PATTERSON/The Day

■ Above, Stephanie Benner, a machine operator at The Beadery in Hope Valley, R.I. pours beads into a counting machine.

■ Top, snails to go!

frogs, or other insects, animals or ornaments. "It's exploded. Demand has tripled in the past six months," says Steven H. Lord, vice

president of marketing for Green Plastics and for The Beadery, the company's division that designs and markets beads and other plastic products for the craft industry.

Lord says he was at trade show in Chicago last year when a woman told him her daughter used his company's beads to design a lizard. When Lord asked a few questions, the woman returned the next day and gave Lord one of the bead-and-cord geckos.

"It was real cute," he admits.

A few months later, The Beadery division was besieged with orders for its small pony beads — the 9-by-6 mm plastic bead with a 4 mm hole — from retailers who had customers demanding them.

"It just took off," recalls Lord. "Everyone started calling for them."

Design Originals, a Fort Worth, Texas, publishing house, released a "Beadie Babies"

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Hope Valley company cashing in on the toy bead craze

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book three months ago with different bead-critter patterns and information on where to get the beading supplies. The book was such a hit, the Texas company immediately printed nine additional "folders" with easy-to-follow, full-color patterns and other beading information.

"It's been phenomenal," says Barbara Burnett, media director for Design Originals. "We sold more than 300,000 copies of the first book in three months, and for some of our books, we don't sell that many in years."

These pony beads have just gone wild. Stores are telling us they just can't get enough of them. One retailer told us he sold \$27,000 in packaged pony beads in one month."

This past July, Crafts Magazine, a bible for American crafters, featured the beaded buddies on its cover and on a full-color page inside.

"This is a good example of how a fad in the craft industry gets started," says Lord, explaining that when this craze passes, there will be a new use for the bead company's products.

Rae Seifert, who is head of The Beadery's product design and promotion division, says beads have always been used for crafts.

Over the years, the fads have just changed.

In 1979, when the movie "10" was a hit, Bo Derek's cornrow hairdo, beaded with pony beads, fueled a run on the small plastic baubles as

hair accessories. And even today, travelers to the Caribbean know that natives there will style tourist's hair with cornrows and colorful beads.

"They're probably our beads," adds Seifert.

Another time, Lord said people used the beads to plug holes punched into plastic flower pots that they would then make into lamps.

"They were very popular with a certain crowd," he says. "They used them like lanterns."

Some crafters thread the beads onto safety pins and make "friendship pins," and for decades, parents and teachers have used beads and string as a fun activity for children.

"They have always been used for something," says Seifert. "There are a lot of different uses. We ship all over the world, and people call and ask us for them all the time."

Beads in abundance

More than 1 million pounds of beads are produced at The Beadery in Hope Valley each year: buckets of beads, barrels of beads, boxes of beads, even bins of beads.

The Beadery makes 750 styles of beads, and manufactures most of them in hundreds of different colors.

If all of the beads manufactured at The Beadery in a single year were placed end to end, Lord says they would stretch from New York to San Francisco and back again.

There are beads that look like animals, fish, trains, and planes, along with alphabet beads, glow-in-the-

dark beads, heart-shaped beads, gold-plated beads, spaghetti beads, and wavy disc beads.

Big barrels are filled with beads: about 200 pounds of them, or 288,000 pieces. More than half of a 40,000-square-foot warehouse is packed floor-to-ceiling with beads, waiting to be shipped.

And if you cross rural Canonchet Road in Hope Valley, from the historic, red brick Greene Plastics manufacturing building on one side to The Beadery's modern warehouse and design offices on the other side, you'll notice that the road shines with brightly-colored pony beads.

The building and grounds are meticulous, but stray beads seem to drop everywhere. "I'm not sure how many we have here. Too many to count," says Lord.

The Beadery, an employee-owned company since 1985, is the largest distributor of plastic beads in the United States. Since 1932, when Oliver Weston Greene converted the old mill to a plastics plant, Greene Plastics has been making pieces for costume jewelry, gifts and toys. Today, about 95 percent of the firm's business is beads.

The small, brightly-colored and pierced orbs are sold in bulk, bags or in kits at craft and chain stores across the country and around the world. The most popular is the pony bead.

There are two legends of how the bead got its name. One is that in Colonial times ceramic beads were put in pony kegs — normally used

for whiskey — and used as ballast in ocean-going ships. The other is that Native Americans used beads to decorate the manes of horses.

Today, the beads are used primarily for crafts and jewelry. They are manufactured from polystyrene or acrylic.

Beads and dyes

Clear plastic pellets are shipped in 1,000-pound boxes, or by the tanker truck, and pumped into silos. In the dyeing room at Greene, workers mix packets of dry dye with 100-pound barrels of pellets, then toss them to create new hues. The plastic is then molded by machinery into beads.

Seifert oversees a team of designers who think of ways to use the beads and other products made by Greene. At The Beadery, workers' desks are littered with pipe cleaners, mosaic chips, glue, gimp, cord, and ribbons.

"This is not a boring job," says designer Lorraine Kazan, holding a beaded, three-dimensional snail she created. "The idea for this came to me while I was home one night. I was playing with the beads, trying to get a feel for them, and out popped the snail."

The colorful gastropod is one of dozens of "Beadery babies" Kazan and other designers have created.

"We always have to come up with new ideas," says Seifert.

"They're great on your key chain, or hanging from your rear-view mirror in the car," says Kazan. "I have

one on my golf bag."

Seifert says children like to make the bead critters and characters, but many adults are using the beads to make decorations for the holidays. Design Originals, the Texas publishing house, has instructional folders on a variety of themes, including seasonal decorations, aliens, birthstones, prehistoric creatures, and personalized items.

At stores like Wal-Mart and Joanne Fabrics, which sell the beads, The Beadery gives out free instructions for making some of the creatures.

"Beads are a real hot item right now," says Burnett, the publishing media director. "Kids love them, the materials are easy to get and affordable, and they are fun."

The fad got its start when a mother from Redmond, Wash., packed bags of beads and string to keep her children occupied while traveling. The kids fiddled with the beads and cord and created bead creatures.

"This is a fad that came from the kids, and it caught on," says Burnett. "They're very easy to make, and the kids like to hang them on back packs, belt loops, or trade them with friends."

Lord, the Beadery's vice president, agrees.

"It's one of those things you can't predict," he says. "But I think these will be hot until every kid in the country makes eight or 10 of these things, then it will gradually fade off, or fall off the end of the earth, until a new fad comes along."