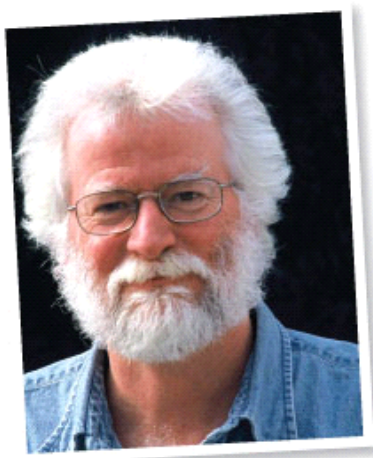


The Friel World

2/28/2017

Good Show!

John Friel



John Friel

The season's first big trade show, MANTS, is on the books and it was a good one. As usual.

Exhibiting at a successful show has its upside and its downside. The good: We saw lots of friends, wrote orders, strutted our new stuff, met potential customers and basked in a sunny glow of optimism. For most of us, nothing has gone seriously wrong yet. People are just getting going, or getting ready, and everybody's full of the excited optimism that comes of new beginnings. Of course, things have gone wrong for some of us. A troubling bankruptcy here, a serious fire there—not that there are any pleasant bankruptcies or casual fires.

But I digress. Working a good show, even the bad news is a good problem to have: You can't see most of it. You're too busy in your own booth to weave through 11,000 attendees and visit more than a handful of the 1,000 or so other vendors spread over 7 acres. I didn't even hit every aisle, but I got around as best I could.

Despite being one of America's premier shows, MANTS is no IPM Essen, the German juggernaut. But that's an unfair comparison: There is only one world's largest hort show. What debuted there three years ago is emerging here now, right on schedule.

Here, the trends of trade shows past still stand out: Succulents, natives, ornamental grasses, pollinator-friendly plants. Even bromeliads, retro "air plants" of '70s and '80s fame, were well-represented. None of the categories above is new. But there's plenty new within them and a new awareness of their virtues: the key environmental roles of pollinators, the rugged beauty of our indigenous flora, the self-sufficiency of succulents, the myriad uses, forms and sizes of grasses. I work for a grass propagator, so it was great to see increasing interest in that market. Natives and infertile miscanthus were both high on our "Do You Have?" meter.

An irksome trend in evidence, at MANTS and everywhere else, is plant downsizing. For years I've grumbled about our obsession with "flowering meatballs," cute little roundy-moundy things, to no avail. But at a recent conference, rising industry star Jared Barnes bestowed his trademark enthusiasm on "big-a** plants!" And at

dinner one evening during MANTS, Angela Treadwell-Palmer of Plants Nouveau bemoaned breeders' tendency to give us more and more "gumdrops." It's nice to have some company.

If we stay on this track, consumers will eventually believe that our products are fit only for containers or for "gardens" consisting of colorful diminutive domes arranged like hors d'oeuvres on a blanket of mulch. Please, give us more trailers, climbers—yes, even sprawlers! A steady diet of meatballs and gumdrops doesn't build strong bones, teeth or gardens. But each year as I revise our perennial catalog, I have to find positive ways to say that this new plant is like that older one, only less.

Five years ago, Allan Armitage predicted that the garden of the future is a pot on the patio. He was more accurate than I'd wanted to believe. Must we make it a self-fulfilling prophecy? I digress again. Sorry.

It would be hard to overstate how important MANTS has become. Jacques Ferrare of Star Roses & Plants (now part of Ball Horticultural Company) said, "This is no longer a regional show." He's right. With visitors and/or exhibitors from 45 States and 15 countries, it's national, even borderline international, in scope. It's one of only two U.S. hort shows I know of with a waiting list for booth space. Can you name the other? Of course you can. **GP**

John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.