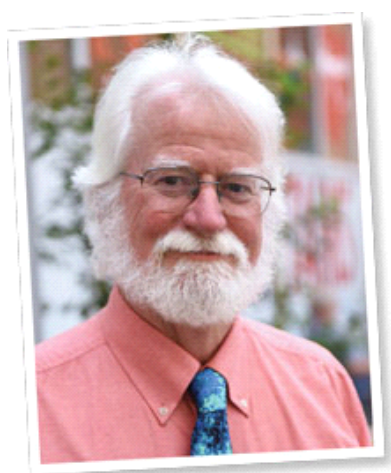


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New Products, Ancient Practices

John Friel



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Consider the bowerbird. The male of this Australia/New Guinea species weaves grasses into an elaborate “bower,” which he then adorns with colorful baubles—stones, berries, plastic bottlecaps—to attract a mate. If he builds it, she will come.

Other birds’ mating rituals involve carefully choreographed dances. Cranes prance, bow and leap. Peacocks shake their radiant booties. Red-tailed hawks soar, link talons and tumble through the sky. The red-capped manakin performs a gliding moonwalk that Michael Jackson couldn’t top, especially on a slender limb high above the forest floor.

Homo sapiens do some pretty odd things to attract potential mates, too. In a ritual dating to the 1600s, some Welsh suitors carve wooden spoons for the object of their ardor. Americans prefer sports cars. Nearly all cultures engage in some form of dance, and of course, the Internet affords more

options than will fit in this space. Three new dating sites have launched since you started reading.

Like gaudy avians, garden retailers strut their stuff in an attempt to lure the female of our species. Mating season runs all year, peaking in spring. Apologies to the great and growing number of men who garden and make garden purchasing decisions, but it’s still accurate, if decreasingly so, to default to feminine pronouns when describing GC customers. More guys gardening is a welcome change. But all genders—let’s leave bathroom labeling issues out of this—are drawn to glittery objects.

Among the shinier baubles I’ve seen lately is 2018’s Perennial Plant of the Year, *Allium Millenium*. It’s new to me, though not to the industry. Besides home gardening, my bulb experience is minimal. But brand-newness is not among the criteria by which the Perennial Plant Association selects the POY. It’s chosen democratically by members who know it, grow it, sell it and/or spec it. Ergo, it’s a pretty sure thing, as a look back at PPA’s track record proves.

Touring Terra Nova Nurseries this summer, I loved their newer heuchera varieties with richly-colored flowers. It’s their signature genus, though hardly their only area of expertise, so it’s no surprise when they introduce another good one. But the flowers really got my attention.

In the 1980s when Palace Purple (another POY) was taking American gardens by storm, I offered it to a skeptical Maryland nurseryman. He scoffed, “Who wants a coral bells that ain’t got no coral bells?” I should have replied,

“Everybody but you.”

Palace Purple opened the garden gate for nearly two hundred (so far) patented heuchera cultivars. Many have wonderful foliage in myriad colors, but like Palace Purple their flowers are nondescript or worse. Gardeners often remove them. So it's great to see coral bells with bells again, not just as an afterthought and not just in coral.

New infertile varieties of pennisetum from University of Georgia breeding (which my employer does offer) quell qualms about spreading, but just as importantly, if not more so, their functionally sterile nature means lusher and longer flowering.

I rarely tout a tender plant, but Senecio Angel Wings is really shiny. It's drawn people into our booth at three consecutive trade shows, arms outstretched zombie-like, to fondle its soft, softly gleaming silver leaves. We've even been asked, “Is it real?” Yep. It's real.

An interesting product offered by several growers: sedum tiles, i.e., community trays densely packed with different low-growing varieties and colors. Little Prince of Oregon, where I first saw them, told me gardeners cut them, sod-like, to size/shape, and voilà! Instant rock-garden carpet. Clever.

Courting and wooing rituals aren't just for the birds. Build your bower, flaunt your tempting baubles and bust a move.

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