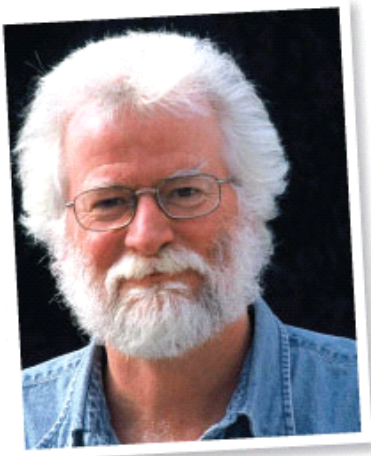


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# A Tale of Many Cities

*John Friel*



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Another tradeshow season dwindles down to a few fall events. Some say tradeshows themselves are dwindling—a dying breed, obsolete artifacts from pre-digital epochs.

The doomsayers have arguments. There are inefficiencies in hauling people, plants, machinery etc. cross-country and back. There are the Ghosts of Tradeshows Past. Cue clanking chains.

**THE DEPARTED** (Not a complete list.)

**PANTS (Penn-Allied Nursery Trade Show):** This popular three-day summer show outgrew Hershey, Pennsylvania, had some successful years near Philadelphia, inexplicably migrated to Atlantic City, shriveled to two poorly-attended days in Philly, and vanished.

**MANTS'** summer version wasn't drawing in Baltimore and fared worse in Virginia Beach. Its plug was pulled decades ago.

**IGC East:** The successful Chicago event for independent garden centers didn't transplant well, with disappointing results in Washington and Baltimore. The original is still rockin' the Navy Pier.

**BPI** (Bedding Plants International) became PPGA (Professional Plant Growers Association), then BPI again. I worked one show and then there were none.

**Mid-Am** (near Chicago) was canceled for lack of support the year I was scheduled to speak. Coincidence? Hope so.

**New England Grows!** was a large, influential happening with robust commercial and educational components. The recession and consecutive bad-weather years (Boston in February: brutal) weakened it; switching to December didn't save it.

**CENTS** (Columbus) has folded its tradeshow tent. Renamed Midwest Green Industry Xperience, it will consist of a Member Summit in December and Training Days in March.

**SURVIVORS & THRIVERS** (Also not a complete list)

**Cultivate (Columbus, July):** The 800-lb. gorilla of green industry events combines show biz and education like no other. It bears a puzzling self-inflicted wound: the yearly lodging debacle. Other shows negotiate rates at strategic hotels, establish a reservation window and step aside. Book what you need with one phone call or email. Cultivate's

byzantine monopoly is infamous. Need multiple rooms? Some unlucky staffer will be stuck online interminably, hating life, keying and rekeying the same data for each person, and you'll probably end up in multiple hotels.

**MANTS** (Baltimore, January) trails Cultivate closely in importance to eastern growers. No seminars, all commerce. For many, this upbeat three-day show kicks off the season.

**GSHE (Mobile, January):** With over 300 vendors, Gulf States Horticultural Expo is a sizeable regional event that's holding its own and growing.

**Farwest** (Portland, August) was massive until the housing/building bubble burst, triggering the Great Recession. By conservative estimate, the "nursery state" lost one in three nurseries. The show's footprint and attendance shrank accordingly. It's still recovering, but feels stable now.

**NorthEast Greenhouse Conference**, a biennial event in Boxboro, Massachusetts, rotates around New England. NEGC's education/accreditation side is well-attended; the small (under 100 exhibitors) trade show is sold out.

Tradeshows will only become unnecessary when the only conversations are between giant companies. Megaretailers and megagrowers don't prowl tradeshows stalking next season's offerings; their suppliers have already pitched their wares for the coming year or two.

In today's climate of mergers and buyouts, it's easy to conjure a dystopian future where big shows, without losing square footage, contain just a dozen sprawling booths occupied by monoliths who grow, manufacture and sell nearly everything.

But there's still an audience: the rest of us stubborn small, medium and large-ish players. There will still be money to be made supplying this multi-tiered industry's needs and what better venue to showcase those wares? **GP**

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