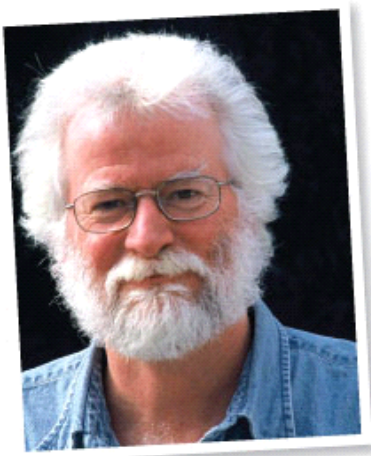


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Ferns & Terns

John Friel



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I recently sojourned on Galveston Island, Texas, for a week of birdwatching. Yes, Pennsylvania has birds, but not like this major stopover for migrating avians.

Gulf coast birds differ in kind—with overlaps, of course—and in sheer numbers. We saw 150 distinct species, from thousands of terns and avocets to a rare pair of whooping cranes, America's tallest flying bird.

So I went for the fauna, but you know how that goes. We green industry types are prone to a benign occupational hazard: wherever we are, we ogle the local flora, in nature or in pots with price tags. And consciously or otherwise, we compare it with home. Trees, animals, gas prices ... it's just what humans do.

I visited Tom's Thumb Nursery and Landscaping, a tidy family-owned IGC since 1975. Similarities and differences, PA vis-a-vis TX, were obvious immediately. Many of the annuals, I'd find back home: petunias, pelargonium (misabeled geranium everywhere), begonia, hybrid impatiens and so on.

But the annuals, herbs and edibles were shaded by 25 ft.-tall palms, with ID placards stapled to their ample trunks. Great-tailed grackles shrieked from their wind-tossed fronds overhead. Definitely not a PA ambience.

Of course there were succulents. The category's persistent popularity knows no geographical boundaries. Inside the store was a phenomenon that's taken me aback before: psucculents.

When I first saw plastic echeveria and pseudo-crassula I wondered: Why bother, when the real thing is so low-maintenance? But there's hostile terrain out there: hotels with inaccessible recesses to decorate, basement offices left unheated on weekends, the homes of admitted black-thumbs who crave color, but can't keep the real thing going.

I shouldn't admit this, but some fakes are pretty good. I had to touch one to confirm it was resin, not living epidermis.

Speaking of succulents, I was pleased to find opuntia both on the bench and in the wild. I've photographed this adaptable genus in Arizona deserts, Mid-Atlantic gardens and now subtropical Texan marshes.

One could say cranes and terns are similarly adaptable: They're found in sweltering Texas, far northwestern Canada, and points between. But their survival strategy involves seasonal relocation to where the weather suits their clothes. Prickly pear stays put, handling heat, humidity, hurricanes or hoarfrost. Yes, Zone 9 freezes "a couple of

times a year,” said Tom’s Thumb staffer Yvonne Dugal.

Hardy landscaping offerings were a blend of universal (echinacea, rudbeckia) and distinctively regional: enormous pots of cycads, fan palms, agapanthus, red-flowering Texas yucca (Hesperaloe) and strelitzia (bird of paradise). “Perennial” embraces a longer list of genera in Zone 9, where spring hits while I’m still shoveling snow.

Another eye-catcher: carnivorous plants. Yvonne said spiky, gleaming *Drosera filiformis* sells well in 4-in. pots at \$16.99. They’re grown by a nearby specialist, which reminded me of how orchids went from quirky niche to Costco staple. I can’t see sundews following that track, but I’ve been wrong before.

More overlaps, more gaps: Some birds, like the whoopers and certain tanagers, I’d never seen before. But while the cardinals and crows we know in PA were here, robins were conspicuously absent. I’d deemed that everyday thrush ubiquitous, but it’s scarce on the island.

Traditionally, gardens serve as buffers where tamed nature does man’s bidding. That concept is becoming fluid, with more thought given to how plantings can benefit species besides our own. The inevitability of this adjustment struck me as I photographed a native *gaillardia* whose flower was indistinguishable from many in commerce.

Of course, I wasn’t really after the flower: I was stalking a camera-shy marsh warbler, which eluded me. But the *gaillardia* was a good consolation prize. **GP**

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