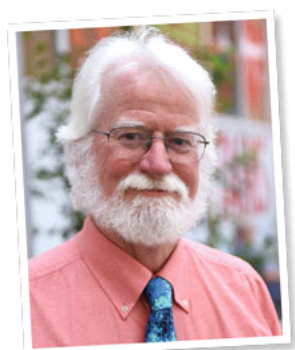


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The Seasons, They Go Round and Round

John Friel



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The seasons have cycled back around to talk of new varieties. Frankly, I prefer recent varieties, ones that growers and gardeners have had a crack at. It's simpler to spot the keepers after a couple of cycles.

Examples of hot new intros that didn't work as advertised are easily found. The mere mention of not-so-perennial *Coreopsis* Limerock Ruby still raises hackles 20 years on. The lovely invasive thug *Artemisia vulgaris* Oriental Limelight remains on the market, amazingly, albeit with stern warnings about where not to plant it. And so on.

Luckily, it says here, more good stuff than bad comes to market each year and it's always fun to see what's coming next. Looking at new intros from old friends, I'm struck by how natives, once a niche market, have gone mainstream.

Natives were once so niche, the late lamented Niche Gardens in North Carolina could call itself that because North American natives were all they offered. That's still pretty niche, come to think of it.

Coincidentally, the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society recently bestowed gold medals on two native perennials: *Spigelia marilandica* Little Redhead, a.k.a. Indian pink, and *Vernonia* Iron Butterfly, a.k.a. ironweed.

I can vouch for spigelia: I've grown the straight species and seen the named variety. It blooms for a gratifyingly long time with a rare flower color: true red. Not sorta red, deep pink or magenta—we're talking RED red with a bright yellow center. True reds and true blues are still the Holy Grail of the perennial world.

This genus isn't easy to find. No local GC seems to carry it. But a local company I've mentioned before, BloomBox, will deliver Little Redhead to your door for—are you ready? \$32 per gallon pot.

As a former marketer, I appreciate the name Iron Butterfly. Yes, it brings to mind an awful psychedelic-era band. But it perfectly sums up *Vernonia*'s tough-as-nails nature and deceptively delicate appearance.

So what else is new? *Echinacea* goes without saying. Breeder Jim Ault probably didn't foresee the avalanche he would trigger in 2004 with his groundbreaking Meadowbrite varieties. The world was ready and the market ripe for coneflowers in colors other than pinky/lavender and muddy white—and in sizes and habits other than tall and sprawly.

At least 300 varieties, in a rainbow of hues, have been patented since. Some proved to be not such good perennials. They're gone.

I live not far from four major perennial propagators: Emerald Coast Growers, Creek Hill Nursery, North Creek Nurseries and Aris Green Leaf. Combined, they ship hundreds of millions of starters annually. Each offers dozens of echinacea varieties and makes room for several new ones every catalog cycle from breeders worldwide. Nick DiBernardo, trial manager at ECG, says his favorites are the recent-but-not-brand-new Artisan series, the first F1 hybrids from seed.

More natives: *Amsonia hubrichtii* has become almost a staple despite a ho-hum appearance at retail in spring. Its cool blue flowers bloom early and last longer than I once thought. But amsonia doesn't really strut its stuff until the flowers are gone and its feathery foliage dominates, swaying gracefully in the slightest breeze, turning bright yellow in fall.

I first saw amsonia at Chanticleer. If you don't know that garden, put it on your Must Visit list next time you're in PA. It's that good. So is *A. hubrichtii*, a Perennial Plant of the Year, but there's an upgrade. John Wachter introduced *A. x Butterscotch* about five years ago, but it's still scarce at retail. It shouldn't be. It resists the tip dieback that disfigures *A. hubrichtii*. It's bigger, more vigorous and a better bloomer. It stays green somewhat longer, but turns an even cooler, deeper, butterscotch-y color.

Time for one more Nick pick: *Agastache Beelicious Purple* from Concept Plants. Gardeners can't get enough pollinator-friendly plants these days and pollinators can't get enough of these two-tone flower spikes.

This Space has opined repeatedly that New! is by far more a fetish for wholesalers than for most gardeners, who are often overwhelmed just choosing among six hostas, let alone 50 coneflowers. "What's new?" was the commonest question ever heard when I was in the trade show cycle, but at GCs? Not so much. **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.