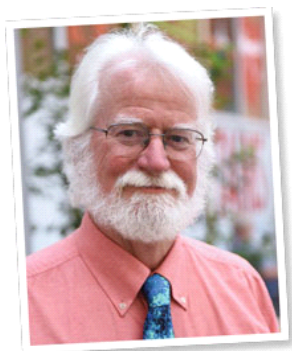


10/1/2023

The Trials I've Seen

John Friel



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"Trial" is a fraught word lately, but relax: We're talking plants, not politics.

My hort career mostly involved marketing starters, so it's always a welcome revelation to see plants in their full-grown glory, not 3-in. tall, sharing a 10 to 20 tray with 71 identical siblings. It was a kick to visit three fine trial gardens recently: Aris Green Leaf, Emerald Coast Growers and Penn State Research Center.

Variety-wise, there's lots of overlap, and by the time you read this, there'll be little to see at any of them. Ergo, I'll focus more on What than on Where.

PSU included many 3-year-old plantings, which yield information not available on tighter timetables. Looking great on a hot August afternoon, Year 3: Buddleia

Chrysalis Blue; Carex Feather Falls, a really impressive grasslike plant; and the Echinacea Artisan series, especially Red Ombre.

Faring less well: Coreopsis Fall Sensation Amber, with just two of six plants surviving. A surprising drop: It scored 4.2 of 5 last year.

Echinacea everywhere made me smile. Dutch-bred SunSeekers Rainbow, as its name implies, is an eye-catching multicolored novelty. SunMagic Vintage Red and Vintage Ruby (Flamingo Holland) were outstanding, with excellent form and clean, robust foliage. Sunny Days Ruby and Lemon (Terra Nova) looked great, as did Darwin's Double Scoop. But pollinators can't get at the nectaries of such poodle-cut double coneflowers.

Phlox paniculata Jeana impressed me two years ago and I'm not alone: The Perennial Plant Association (PPA) anointed it Perennial Plant of the Year (PPOY) for 2024. Discovered in Nashville, it's a tall one, up to 3 ft., with lavender-pink flowers. And, of course, it's mildew resistant. Key word: Resistant. There's no mildew-proof tall phlox, alas. But this one's cleaner (so far) than those around it.

Agastache Crazy Fortune, a Dutch discovery, is a white-variegated sport of Blue Fortune. I'd gotten a bad early impression from a planting that reverted to its more vigorous parent—ironic, since Europe's PBR process allegedly weeds out such instabilities better than America's patent system. But this year, it was as-advertised. The variegation is subtle, so unless you're quite close it's just a smaller Blue Fortune, blooming like crazy.

Kniphofia Glowstick has impressed me wherever and whenever I've seen it. Veronica Candela Pink (Dümmen) was gorgeous this year. And we're finally seeing some really good, garden-worthy dark sedum varieties, after years of spindly, floppy prototypes. Walters Gardens' Back in Black and Terra Nova's Peach Pearls were extraordinary, as

were the Mojave Jewels series from AB Cultivars, especially Sapphire and Ruby.

I loved seeing Rudbeckia Goldsturm cheek-to-cheek with American Gold Rush, which I consider its upgrade. Goldsturm was showing why it was chosen PPOY in 1999, outshining the newer form, which had just begun to bloom. But a day in a trial garden is a snapshot in time: Give that planting a week and roles would reverse, with American Gold Rush strutting the stuff that made it PPA's pick for PPOY 2023.

Walking the rows at PSU in Landisville, I felt the hovering presence of old friend and ex-colleague Sinclair Adam, the extension agent who inherited the trials 10 years ago and—Yay!—introduced perennials and ornamental grasses to a mostly-annuals program.

Sadly, Sinc died unexpectedly in April. His friends and family take some solace from the fact that, fittingly, he passed away in his garden—"right beside the hellebores," said his widow, Kirsten.

Sinc spent more than 30 years in the industry: in retail; as a grower for a large propagator; as an educator; and at his and Kirsten's own nursery, Dunvegan, where he bred daylilies, tiarella and Phlox paniculata. Before joining PSU Extension he was an adjunct professor at Temple University. Whoever gets this garden next has big Wellies to fill.

Trials come in all shapes, sizes, purposes and levels of accessibility. PSU's are open most days. Breeders' in-house trials often have "Off Limits" areas. But, it says here, they all count.

This column is a quiet shout-out to every entity that creates and maintains trials. Such testing grounds—academic or commercial, public domain or secret sauce—are vital links in the supply chain that make the world's gardens and landscapes better every year.

Thank you all. **GP**

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