

The Great Debate

Stephanie Cohen and John Friel

In this corner, a vertically challenged (but height-gifted with opinions), gardening diva

And in this corner, a subtly undercutting Irishman, likely belonging to the GLF

Dear John,

I've always wanted to write a "Dear John" letter. I hope you're not offended, but this one is for a good cause.

As you know I'm only a lowly horticulturist. I don't have a crystal ball; I've been relegated to a glistening gazing ball. Such is our lot.

Green Profit has asked us to write our thoughts on trends. Of course, I'm sure they'll tell the readers the ideas are ours, and they bear no responsibility. I don't blame them.

Branding is no longer a matter of debate. It's here to stay and will only grow bigger. No woman worth her salt shops without a brand name in mind. None of us just buy peas; we buy Green Giant or Del Monte. Brand names have even replaced the vernacular. Most of us ask for Kleenex, not tissue. If I'm spending \$300 on a Coach purse, I want to flaunt it. Because the majority of garden center customers are women, branding doesn't seem strange to us at all

Brands like Flower Fields, Proven Winners, Trophy Taker day lilies, Blooms of Bressingham, Simply Beautiful and others will continue to grow.

This trend is particularly aimed at garden centers that refuse to change with the times. If your end cap is full of Rudbeckias, you'll sell just that plant. If your display is a charming vignette of three perennials that have the same environmental requirements, you have the possibility, even probability, of selling multiple perennials. Remember, woman does not live by bread alone.

Additionally, a perennial garden for structure and winter interest needs some shrubs, vines, and small trees. The concept of the mixed border is mushrooming.

Give them an end cap with the background, as well as the foreground, and you may sell an entire garden. Think of how clothing is merchandised from Nordstrom to Saks. If we show blouses, we sell blouses; if we show suits, blouses, shoes, purses and jewelry, we may sell an entire ensemble. Guys, get used to it—women are used to shopping this way. I suspect this is why Spring Meadow and Proven Winners have joined forces; they intend to sell the whole kit and caboodle of shrubs, perennials and annuals.

Water gardening is supposed to be booming. But that requires that the customer have the time, energy and money for an elaborate system. I think you'll be seeing more large containers with one to three water plants. Recently a lot

of the wholesale water plant growers have been featuring small, containerized bog gardens. These have been attracting a lot of attention, giving smaller garden centers something unique to sell.

The more experienced gardeners are placing the emphasis on foliage, as well as flowers. Keep looking for an explosion of golds, purples variegates and bi-colored foliage. Also, I see a shift in some of your customers' color preferences. Ladies are now into hot pink, lime and chartreuse greens, as well as hot pinks. When I first saw these colors I thought fiasco. Wrong! I think hot colors are on the upswing, and people who avoided them may prefer them now. People who wear black, brown and gray all the time will stick with the tried and true. Younger customers are going to prefer a little more razzmatazz.

Container mania is still on the rise. Watch out: The three geraniums with the lone *Dracaena* in a pot may be hot stuff in the hinterlands, but people want to mix everything together. Yes, Dorothy, there is life after just cannas and bananas. I see all kinds of plants coexisting in large containers. You name it, we'll contain it. More and more dwarf and compact shrubs, both the hardy and non-hardy types, are getting potted. I see greater use of vines in containers. Of course, herbs, annuals and perennials are in there.

However, it's the tropicals and tender perennials that will continue to steal the lion's share of the container dollars. The market for this mania is reflected in the amount of new books on the subject.

Last but not least, let's look at pots and garden art. Plastic pots have gotten better. They not only look like terracotta, but they come in a whole raft of styles and colors. I still like my Crete pots—you know, those pink-orange imported terracotta ones? I also like the Guy Wolfe originals, but now I'm mixing in some great stylish plastic look-alikes. The price is right, and the ease of movement is sensational.

I'm afraid to tell you that pink flamingos and fat ladies bending over are still passé. However, gnomes are making a comeback. Not the kitschy one, but authentic reproductions from garden art books. Being short, I empathize with this gnome craze and have several little ones in my garden. After all, everyone has to look down on someone. In my case this is hard to do. (Although I think, John, with a last name like Friel, you could always use some leprechauns.)

So John, now it's your turn to be your usual curmudgeonly self and give us the lowdown as you see it.

—Stephanie Cohen

Dear Stephanie,

Offended? Me? Heck, I've been getting "Dear John" letters all my life.

As always, you paint a vivid and entertaining picture. Speaking of pictures: Readers should know that my retail experience is a Kodak moment compared to your Sistine Chapel ceiling. But you asked, so here goes.

Containers. You're right: Containers will remain copasetic. The manufacturers are making great stuff in a wide range of materials and prices. With containers, homeowners can be creative—or pay the garden center to be creative for them. Containers are living ornaments for outdoor entertaining, and they take the guilt out of discarding plants you're tired of, annual or perennial, at year's end.

Razzmatazz. I laughed at your cliché container—"three geraniums with a lone *Dracaena*." Remember that Long Island garden center we visited? It was like stepping back into the '70s: hand-lettered signs, sun-bleached labels, play-it-safe perennials, and ho-hum combos like geraniums and a lone *dracaena*. Everything but bellbottoms.

Evolutionary science says that to survive, an organism needn't be perfect; it just has to work. The bumblebee's wing, for instance, is hopelessly ill suited to its body. Any aeronautics engineer could improve its design. But

bumblebees bumble blissfully on, oblivious, because that wing is as good as it needs to be. And so is that garden center, and that planter—for now.

Water gardening: I like my water features big enough to accommodate a canoe. Otherwise, my interest is marginal, so let's not get bogged down in this discussion. I will say that fear of West Nile Virus means moving water trumps still water. Self-contained mini-fountains are flowing by the cash register.

Garden art. I laughed again at "Gnomes are making a comeback." Have you heard of The Gnome Liberation Front? These loosely organized jokers "liberate" gnomes from gardens, with humorous intent. On a baseball diamond in New England, overnight, as if by magic, a gnome ballgame broke out. There were gnomes on base, a gnome at bat, gnome umpires, gnomes in the dugout, gnomes on the benches.

The Lord must love lunatics, or there wouldn't be so many of you—er, them.

As for leprechauns ... sorry, I'm a little too old to be believin' in leprechauns.

The pundits outside our little green world tell us consumers are into "affordable luxuries," like cigars, massages and other small indulgences. Nostalgia, cocooning and a range of de-stressing activities are big.

What's that mean to us? Well, a beautiful back yard is an affordable luxury, *and* a great place to de-stress, especially if someone else does the hardest parts, leaving you as much, or as little, grunt work as you wish. For time-starved Americans, traveling less in the post-9/11 world, a landscaping service is that affordable luxury. I'd love a gift certificate for a fall cleanup.

Other side of the coin: I think we undersell gardening as exercise. Spend an afternoon mulching and weeding, skip a trip to the gym. Or get a massage instead of a workout. Mmmmmmm ...

Nostalgia. There's still a big future in the past. Heirloom crops, ornamental and edible, strike a strong cocooning chord in insecure times. From apples to tomatoes to hollyhocks, if Grandma grew it, grandson has a story to help sell it.

Green roofs. Not roof gardens, but self-sufficient plants as roofing materials. The benefits include energy savings, decreased run-off, tax breaks and longer roof life. More expense upfront, constant savings every year. Existing structures can be retrofitted. This means good sales opportunities for perennials, especially succulents. Businesses and public buildings have been the incubators, but it works for homes, too.

The trickiest part of your missive involves: branding. I'm a strong believer in brands, and I agree they're "here to stay," but I'm not sure we agree on why. Brands help us reach different consumers for different reasons. The experienced gardener seeks out Blooms of Bressingham, Proven Winners or The Flower Fields because she's tried the product and was impressed. The inexperienced gardener buys the same plant because she's unsure of herself, and the marketing helped make up her mind.

I hate to say it, but your \$300 purse analogy sounds uncomfortably like the inexperienced gardener hiding behind a label because she doesn't trust her own judgment. However, I know you trust your judgment, and we both know that I don't know a Coach purse from a Hefty bag, and I wouldn't know Guy Wolfe if he bit me.

I buy plants the way I buy music. If I hear, or see, something I like, I buy it. If I still like it later, I'll buy more by the same artist, or of same label, because now I trust them. That first purchase was motivated by the product itself; subsequent purchases are triggered by the brand, *if* the brand performed.

In other words, a brand is a promise—a promise of quality, value, and reliability. If the product fulfils the promise, the brand gains value and more purchases ensue. If not, then not. So when you say, "No woman worth her salt shops without a brand name," I have to ask: Is that Morton salt? Could you really tell after sprinkling it on your food?

Branded should mean better—noticeably better.

Predicting trends is risky business. It's like building a doghouse in the dark. Sometimes you hit the nail on the head; sometimes you hit the nail on your thumb. But when you're done, at least you have a place to sleep.

See you at the next symposium.

—John Friel