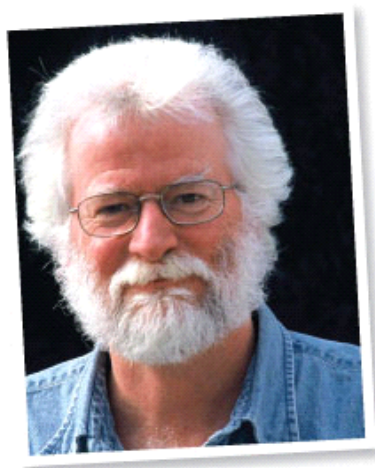


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Long Live the Gas Station Plant

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My car's mirror says, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

In terms of actual objects, the statement is true. Metaphorically speaking, not so. Example: Anno Domini 1992 is still visible, to Boomers like me, in the mirror of a car I own. It was built that very year. But on closer inspection, 1992 is waaay back there, more than a score of years, if you're keeping score.

Waaay back in 1992, the Perennial Plant Association named Coreopsis Moonbeam Perennial Plant of the Year. It's a staple now, but then, Moonbeam was familiar mostly to growers and designers. Only hard-core gardeners knew the name.

Being named POY helped. In a few years, it was everywhere. Perennial diva Stephanie Cohen declared it a "gas-station plant." That sounds dismissive, but—on closer inspection—it's actually high praise.

"Gas station plant" says: This thing is tough. Self-reliant. Low-maintenance. Plants that survive, even thrive, surrounded by asphalt are safe bets in any landscape.

Breeders have wrought a tremendous variety of tremendous coreopsis, yet Moonbeam shines on. Ditto Heuchera Palace Purple; a plethora of competitors has appeared, but POY 1991 is still a player.

So is Calamagrostis Karl Foerster, a more recent (2001) winner. It's overused, people say; it's a cliché. Well, maybe—in places. But in parts of America, ornamental grasses are still radical. Besides, there's a reason why sayings, concepts and plants become clichés: There's something valid about them. They're like snowflakes.

From the Bible through Shakespeare to Disney, it's pretty much agreed: Snow = purity. But the heart of every snowflake is a minuscule bit of airborne crud around which water vapor coalesced and froze, forming an intricate, incandescent entity.

Clichés have similar centers: Some dirty little truth renders them tenable and sustainable, keeping plants in play as they segue from oddity to commodity. Moonbeam and Karl Foerster still fill gardens, not just gas stations. They're consistent best sellers because wherever they're deployed, they make a designer look like a genius.

Other POY winners that went from obscurity to ubiquity include *Perovskia atriplicifolia*, Rudbeckia Goldsturm, Echinacea Magnus and Geranium Rozanne. To become that well-known and used, a plant needs several attributes. It must be easy for just about any grower or gardener, just about anywhere. It must look good in pots.

Price matters. Gas station wannabes should be unpatented, or carry a low royalty. Anyone can grow the aforementioned staples without breaking the bank, without sacrificing precious margin. They yield reliable results either from seed or affordable cuttings. Exception: Rozanne, a workhorse that transcends pricepoint pressure. Finally, gas station plants must work alone, in swaths, or anything in between.

So where are the gas station plants of 2030? Which of the blizzard of new introductions will stick and become clichés?

Many heuchera varieties will survive, but perhaps not the much-ballyhooed Citronelle. It's pretty when it's pretty, but the name suits it: In my garden, it burns like a candle. Its sibling Caramel, however, is tough and vigorous. So are Stainless Steel and Dark Chocolate.

Many echinacea varieties will run out of gas before they pay back their patent investment. The too-touchy, too-pricey ones are already languishing. In grasses, panicum will prevail. As natives go mainstream, indigenous grasses, unfazed by heat and drought, will be more appreciated.

Gaillardia will keep climbing. Surprises like hypericum and thalictrum will make inroads. And there's always room for salvia and sedum.

So ignore that ambiguous mirror: Looking behind is a dangerous driving practice anyway. The future looms in the larger frame in front of us. Let's stop and smell the flowers at the next gas station. **GP**

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