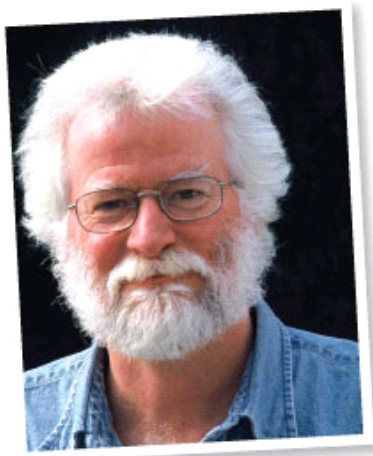


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Shadowy Figures

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Remember Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale, from the Rocky & Bullwinkle cartoons? Those Cold War-era Russian spies lived in terror of their iron-fisted master, Mister Big. They uttered his name trembling and kowtowing: “M-M-Meester B-B-Beeg!”

Unbeknownst to them, Mister Big was actually a tiny creature with a big flashlight. He confronted his underlings only at night, standing in the dazzling beam, projecting his massive shadow onto a handy wall.

My pleasant memories of Boris and Natasha are sometimes jogged unpleasantly by a trade show. Our associations and events are living through a difficult era. Some trade shows have vanished, while others struggle to survive. That’s probably so in many other trades: If the rising

tide of a flourishing economy lifts all boats, the ebb tide of a stubborn recession must lower them.

Here in PA, PANTS has lost attendees and exhibitors for several years running. Now it’s lost a day, becoming a two-day event in yet another new venue, the pricey Philadelphia Convention Center—its sixth home in 40 years.

New England Grows in Boston is also noticeably slimmer. Drapes conceal expanses where booths were once arrayed. The central “commons” area of tables and food vendors seems bigger each year.

Membership in my beloved Perennial Plant Association—I’m lame-duck President as I type, Past President as you read—has dropped by about half from its early ’90s peak. There are fewer perennials-only growers, and more places serving a smattering of the kind of information and expertise that was PPA’s unique bailiwick.

This year’s FarWest Show was a good, large event, but a shadow of its former enormous self. Attendees and exhibitors have ebbed along with western nurseries, hammered by forces within and beyond the industry, like the housing stall. The show guide listed just shy of 400 vendors, down by half from 2005 when the numbers had already shrunk dramatically.

Of the shows I'm involved in, only two—the OFA Short Course and MANTS in Baltimore—boast waiting lists for booth space. The Independent Garden Center show is doing so well, it's expanding to a second venue near Washington D.C.; but the Chicago original is a young event serving an embattled constituency. It's too soon to say what kind of legs it'll have. Meanwhile, OFA's retail-oriented expansion smacks of a reaction to IGC's success.

The cartoon characters come to mind when we try to assess a show's value. Organizers are quick to announce attendance is up, slow to admit it's down. OAN claims an uptick at FarWest this year. PLNA has similar reassurances about PANTS. But they're big on percentages, stingy with actual headcounts and slow to qualify them: What does "total badges" mean? Does it include booth staff, show personnel, security? Was it inflated by multiple badge scans, free passes, free booths?

Of those who organize our organizations and their trade shows, I have a simple request: Please, don't try to be Meester Beeg. Share real data. We faithful exhibitors have a pretty good feel for when things are working. We're optimists and we know it takes very few of the right conversations to make a show worthwhile. But we've seen flashlight tricks.

There are legitimate gray areas here. Many fellow booth-holders are not just competitors, but customers, brokers or sources. Some badge holders are civilians trick-or-treating up and down the aisles, cruising for freebies. Day 3 at some shows brings an endless parade of tire kickers. I used to resent that, but now? Bring 'em on.

At several PPA symposia, national and regional, we've invited interested non-industry types for a "Public Day" event and a peek behind the scenes. We're pooling resources with other horticultural associations. We need more such interfaces. We've been too insular for too long, decrying the dearth of fresh blood in our aging businesses, but denying potential newbies a glimpse backstage.

Let's show 'em how all those trees, shrubs, perennials, grasses, baskets and combos appear at retail. We need them to know it's not magic and that they can do it, too. We need people who never heard of Meester Beeg. **GP**

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