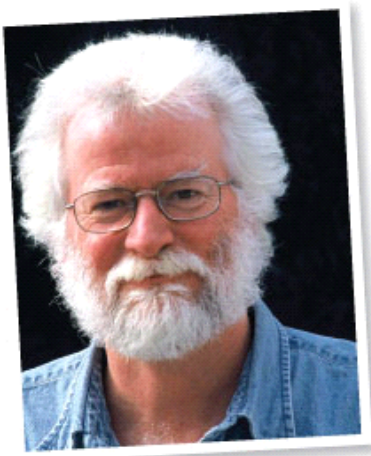


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Speaking of Speaking

John Friel



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My sporadic speaking career—if that's the right word for something one does just a few times a year—had a flare-up recently, with two engagements separated by hundreds of miles and one week.

The first gig was a talk at the fourth annual Ornamental Grasses Day at Intrinsic Perennial Farm in Hebron, Illinois. Owner and breeder Brent Horvath has done as much as anyone to enhance the garden appeal of grasses, especially—but not exclusively—native species.

Ornamental grasses have some unique characteristics affecting their propagation, production and landscape use. They have one huge thing in common with all ornamental categories: To remain relevant, the palette available to designers and gardeners requires refreshing with new, interesting varieties. Many entities toil at other hardy plants, but only a handful explore the family Poaceae and its look-alikes, the sedges. Brent is an

influencer among that handful.

Richard Hawke, noted scientist and Plant Evaluation Manager at Chicago Botanical Garden, also spoke. Our talks were very different: His, accompanied by excellent photography, presented hard data about performance trials. Mine wandered through French explorers, bog turtles, Van Gogh and a layman's ramblings on psychological impacts of big stands of grasses.

Yet we presented a startling number of the same varieties. I assure you, there was no collusion, and upon reflection it was more inevitable than surprising, given the venue and the occasion. The repetition would have bothered me, years ago, but my view has gradually swung 180 degrees.

I used to try not to talk about the same plants another speaker planned to present. Sometimes, there WAS collusion: I'd call them, or they me, and we'd weed out duplications. We've all gotten over that. Now, I say repetition is good. Our national attention span, mine included, seems to shrink by the day. Redundancy isn't just for NASA: If multiple speakers highlight the same plant, maybe it'll stick.

Gig #2 was in Delaware at the national conference of the International Plant Propagators Society, a fine group. There were so many familiar faces, it was hard to believe it was my first IPPS event. My topic: Nomenclature, a subject any number of presenters could attack from myriad angles with few overlaps. We live in confusing times, plant-name-wise. We need a new Linnaeus to impose order upon the chaos.

Time was, all we had to fear at the taxonomists' hands was collateral damage from the usual running battles of lumpers vs. splitters. Compared to the current tyranny of DNA sequencing, algorithm-generated phylogenetic trees, bootstrapping and evolution-based cladistic (rhymes with sadistic) nomenclature, those were the good old days. Fellow speaker Dr. Darrel Apps, breeder of many of the world's finest varieties of *hemerocallis*, told me, "I'm so mad at the taxonomists! Linne said, 'We must simplify things so people can communicate' and here they're doing the exact opposite!"

Never pass up a chance to hang with people whose skills exceed yours. I'm still better on paper than onstage, but my speaking skills have improved largely because I've been privileged to share the podium with some of our industry's best presenters and most honored names—names with initials streaming after them like kite tails, names that adorn the covers of multiple books.

And after delivering two talks in a week, hardly a withering pace, I am, as always, humbled by the stamina and eloquence of those who do dozens per year. Here's to the educators who do the equivalent multiple times daily—people who just rear up on their hind legs and think out loud, never resorting to cheat sheets as I often do. Kudos!

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