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It's a Beautiful Day in the Mirror

John Friel



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Looking back, do you ever get the odd sensation that some of your history happened to someone else, not you?

Did I really work in factories, drive trucks, deliver a baby, survive ugly swims in frigid rapids, look down the wrong end of a gun—twice? Was there really a time when I was not in horticulture?

This month's theme, especially the hanging basket part, triggered odd memories, and reconfirmed the adage that first impressions count because they stick. The foot you get off on is crucial to any relationship: person to person, master and pet, or—seriously—humans and plants. We all have relationships with the plants we love and loathe.

I was introduced to a night-blooming cactus (*Epiphyllum oxypetalum*) before entering the green industries. By flashlight, I followed a friend through a spooky old greenhouse, splashing through narrow puddled aisles. Suddenly, I was face-to-pistil with the most astonishing flower imaginable—huge, ethereal, delicate, white enough to shame snow, fragrant as the breath of angels.

That was four decades ago. Ever since, night bloomers have come and gone in my life, adorning decks and patios, or patiently weathering another winter indoors. Had I first met the clumsy sprawling plant that produces that flower, I might've passed. But my first impression was one of heart-swelling beauty and it stuck.

Not long afterward, horticulture (specifically, delivering finished plants and starters in six states) became my livelihood, and I had a very different introduction to a very different plant. My erstwhile employer planted nicotiana in a thousand hanging baskets. If there's a worse match, it would have to be giant redwoods in market packs.

Flowering tobacco is a vigorous grower with brittle upright stems. It looked sort of okay in baskets for about two days. I delivered them for two weeks, setting my shelves farther apart several times. Picking them up meant plunging my arm in from above and fishing around for the hook. Each evening I'd sweep out heaps of busted stems.

That first impression stuck, too—like a fish hook. Nicotiana and I will never be friends. I copped an attitude about coleus around the same time for the same reason: Our seed-grown choices simply didn't belong in HBs. I've since made peace with that genus, though. There are beautiful basket-worthy varieties out there.

You know what I want to see in a basket? *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*, a perennial groundcover. In fiber hangers,

its stoloniferous nature should create balls of blue flowers. A customer recommended it years ago, but I've never actually tried it.

As I type, MANTS has just ended in Baltimore. For three days, I watched people drawn into our booth to ogle our samples and to get touchy-feely with some. Plants have sensuous powers: They call to us and we obey. Cascading Hakonechloa macra Aureola and silky, tender Senecio candicans Angel Wings attracted the most fondling fingers, making the right impression every time. Did the humans in the booth follow suit? Time will tell.

Time distances us from our former selves. But in the sense that you can never step into the same river twice, that odd disconnected sensation isn't wrong: that really is a different person back there in your rearview.

One's older, wiser self knows things: Find out before, not after the fact, that the obstetrician scheduled for your home delivery is a chronic procrastinator. If you can't miss that big wave, keep your raft straight, your canoe at a slight angle. Stay out of certain neighborhoods. And don't set plants up for failure by sticking them in the wrong containers. **GP**

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