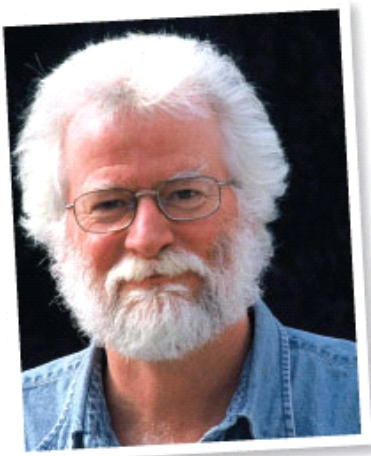


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The Flower Show, at Large

John Friel



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Another year, another Philadelphia Flower Show. Of course, this wasn't just any year or just any show: For the first time in 193 years, it was held outdoors, in FDR Park, near the stadium complex.

I'm a PFS veteran. I could count on one hand the iterations I've missed in over 30 years. My anticipation was that outdoors in June, it would suffer in two key areas. 1) In early March, the Show is a blessed relief from nasty late monochromatic winter. Mid-Atlantic weather is fickle: maybe a light jacket will suffice. Or maybe you'll tiptoe cautiously around rock-hard mounds of filthy black city ice, while lacerating winds whip off the Delaware.

2) There's a gasp-inducing Wow!! factor when you escape the street to a fantasy realm: tropical paradise, Mediterranean magic, lush emerald Ireland. Wouldn't that entry lose its clout when it's June on both sides of the entrance,

just more colorful and better-designed inside?

Nope. They pulled it off. No disappointments. The weather outside was neither frightful nor delightful: It's still officially spring, but the day I went was in the 90s, humid, with showers expected.

This year's theme, "Habitat: Nature's Masterpiece" was interpreted in myriad ways. The percentage of native vegetation was predictably ramped up, with educational displays on invasives, recycling, reuse and remediation. Fifteen acres were divided into zones: Design District, Plant District, Garden District, Gardener's Grove, all incorporating the show's trademark dazzlers.

Massive, brightly-dyed boas of plumosa fern streamed from a domed cupola, with orchids dangling in the center. "Habitat" was spelled out in huge letters stuffed with dried flora. A wetlands display featured towering, bundled Phragmites painted bright fuchsia.

The Show always involves lots of walking, but 2021 eclipsed all records. Bonus: Ample room for food trucks, vendors, a beer garden and strolling musicians.

Given my employer's specialty, it was heartening to see so many grasses, rushes and sedges, native and otherwise. I spotted eragrostis, nassella, panicum, pennisetum, schizachyrium, carex and juncus.

When an event held indoors for nearly two centuries ventures outside, there are bound to be opportunities and challenges. When it moves from late winter to early summer, ditto. One of the draws, for plantsmen, has always

been seeing what new codes were cracked—i.e., what June bloomers had been tricked into performing months ahead of schedule? Well, duh—it WAS June. Even B&B Magnolias were flowering.

In at least two exhibits, robins had built nests in the greenery. In mid-afternoon, we got chased out by an electrical storm. Neither would happen in the Convention Center.

Bottom line: Pennsylvania Horticultural Society mounted a PFS like no other and pulled it off magnificently. Which shouldn't surprise anyone: The 1918 flu pandemic didn't shutter it. Thousands attended during the Great Depression. The 2020 version squeaked in just before lockdown. Only World War II forced a two-year hiatus.

Kudos to PHS for rising to the challenge. This isn't just a major fundraiser, it's a Philly tradition, like cheesesteaks and frustrating sports seasons. How many attended? Thousands, about 5% of them masked. How many thousands? Sorry, as I type, PHS has released no figures.

In a typical good year, PFS pulls over a quarter million attendees into Center City. This felt like a good day in a good year. Also predictable: The green industry's silver lining in the COVID cloud is over 18 million new gardeners.

Speaking of clouds: The storm that chased us out followed us home, ending in a glorious rainbow. That meteorological phenomenon, though co-opted and politicized in recent years, still carries a promise: The worst is over. Things will get better. **GP**

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