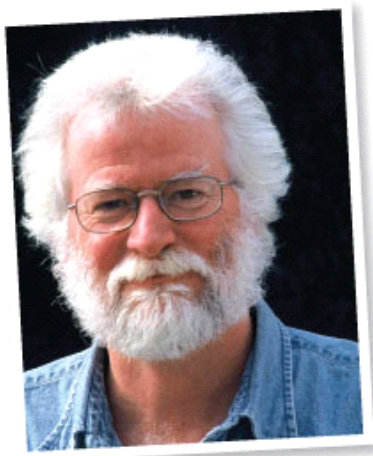


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It's Been HOW Long??

John Friel



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It's hard to believe, but my portrait and my prose have appeared in these pages for 20 years.

My byline debuted in October 2001, under a column concerning 9/11. I'd submitted a normal, cheerful piece about perennials—my title then was “The Perennial Cynic”—but then those planes hit the towers, and the Pentagon, and Western Pennsylvania, and that one had to wait. My editors graciously allowed me to replace it with something more timely.

Mostly, I've written about plants, usually perennials and grasses, but with digressions into annuals and even tropicals, like my beloved night-blooming cactus, *Epiphyllum oxypetalum*, which graced my deck with a dozen blooms this summer. Two more buds are swelling as I type.

I've shared quotes by some of my favorite authors: Annie Dillard, Allen Lacy, Michael Pollan, Dave Barry. I've blathered about raft trips through Grand Canyon, the mixed curse of air travel (proof that one can be scared and bored simultaneously), swollen rivers, fallen trees, kayaking, birdwatching, hog butchering, oil-soaked pelicans, the stubborn survival of the dead tree communication model, firewood, the passing of various industry icons and of my mother, why trade shows are like bumblebees, and the joy of homemade pesto, which (it says here) is Italy's finest contribution to the world. The Sistine Chapel, Sophia Loren and heliocentricity are also impressive, but useless on linguine.

In more germane topics, This Space has examined new plant introductions, IGCs vs. box stores, the Philadelphia Flower Show, the Perennial Plant Association, flower pots made of chicken feathers, my visit to the Netherlands where our industry was invented, the rise of branded plants, good and bad marketing, and customer experiences, attracting and keeping young talent, the absolute necessity of Ag Extension, and recaps of trade shows. That last one hasn't been very fecund column fodder lately.

Another recurring topic: Plant nomenclature. You've probably been told plants have Latin names because Latin is a dead language, so the names need never change, right? Well, put that notion out of your head. I could probably fill a column with names that have changed since 2001, and what their new and old names mean.

But that might be difficult within my strictly-observed 600-word limit. (Go ahead, count 'em. We'll wait.) My usual method is to write 1,000, then delete 400. It's sometimes painful, this literary liposuction, but it improves your reading experience. There's always a shorter, and usually better, way to say anything.

I'm grateful to the editors who've treated me well, with kindness and patience, for two decades. Thank you Ellen Wells, Jen Polanz, Bill Calkins and especially the Bossman, Editor Chris Beytes.

Chris recruited me after reading a newsletter I wrote for a previous employer. He's become a good friend, and even served as tour guide and chauffeur on a visit to garden centers in Germany after IPM Essen, beside which any three U.S. trade shows look kinda puny. Thanks, Chris.

After crafting 240 columns, I'm approaching an age where people start throwing around pejoratives like "codger," "geezer" and—cruellest of all—"spry."

For the record: I may occasionally codge, but I have not yet begun to geeze. And when my prose ceases to be spry, I'll pull the plug. Promise.

Thank you, dear readers, for putting up with me, digressions and all. It's every writer's conceit that our clever ranks of kinked ink, or pixels, are a vast improvement over the purity of the empty page/screen.

But all any of us can do, finally, is to take the blank page of each day, as it comes, and make our mark on it. **GP**

John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.