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Miscellany

John Friel



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This Space hopes you're in the mood for a little of this, a little of that, because that's what's on tap this month. It's the literary equivalent of ordering a flight of draft microbrews at your local taphouse, but you'll still be fine to drive home when we're done.

History in the Making

The Perennial Plant Association (PPA) will celebrate its 40th anniversary later this month at its National Symposium in Asheville, North Carolina. I'm in the process of writing a capsule PPA history. The first two installments are available on the Association's website. When finished, it'll be a four-chapter opus, one decade at a time. It's been an interesting stroll down Memory Lane, by turns hilarious,

heartwarming and bittersweet.

I missed the first few years of the fledgling Association; didn't catch up until 1987. But I've missed very few events since. You make a lot of friends in 37 years as a member, Board member and president, and you meet a lot of influential people, genuine industry pioneers. That's the heartwarming, fun, even inspirational part. But you also lose a lot of friends—and the industry loses those innovators—in those 37 years. That's the bittersweet part.

Yes, you make a lot of memories—and lose a disconcerting number of them. It's frustrating when one's mental filing system refuses to cough up details about a Symposium: You were there, dammit, in St. Louis and Baltimore and Chicago and Montreal and so on. But what gardens, garden centers and greenhouses did we visit? Who were those speakers who lit up the podium? Where was that spectacular dinner you were sure you'd never forget?

Actually, quite a few memories do stand out: Meeting Claude Hope; seeing the world's first non-purple coneflowers; experiencing the shocking devastation of Mt. Saint Helens; ascending the Gateway Arch, hiking the Rockies; sneak peeks at breeders' latest whizbangs.

I'm beyond happy that the Association is still going strong. I hope to see you in Asheville at the end of the month. There are many memories yet to be made—and, um, forgotten.

Retirement

Two years after the end of a longish career in the green industry, it's still disconcerting to have become an onlooker—a customer, a civilian, if you will. But it has its good points. One is the pleasure of finding excellent retail establishments I was only vaguely aware of while toiling in wholesale. Black Creek Greenhouse fits that description.

I'd visit more often if it were closer; from where I live it's a half-hour drive. But loyal customers drive a lot farther.

Established in 1980, Black Creek has everything you'd hope for in a well-thought-out IGC and then some. As always, I looked for birding supplies and was not disappointed. An entire long aisle was stocked on both sides with seed, feeders, nesting boxes, etc. There's outdoor furniture, garden decor, and of course, plants in every category except trees in over 2 acres of greenhouses.

I was there on a Friday and the place was humming: lots of customers filling carts in the greenhouse aisles, cars jockeying for parking spaces, lines at the cash registers. In short, everything a garden center owner would hope for and it was probably even better the next day. I have it on good authority that it made for a fine visit on the retailers tour when the PPA Symposium came to Lancaster in 2022, but that's purely hearsay: Recovering from a bout of COVID, I didn't make a single bus.

Theme

Since this is the New Varieties Issue, here's a nod to a plant that may be new only to me. Jared Hughes of Groovy Plants Ranch patented Begonia Canary Wing in 2015, two years before he was named the PPA's Young Professional of the year. So why was I unaware of it until this season? Well, annuals often fly well below my habitual perennial- seeking radar.

But it's a very cool-looking plant and not easy to find, at least around here in PA. I struck out at half a dozen retailers. At IGCs and box stores alike, I was told they'd sold out and wouldn't be restocking.

Better start shopping earlier in spring 2025. Remind me, OK? Thanks. **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.