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Memory Lane Milestones

John Friel



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The Perennial Plant Association is celebrating its 40th anniversary, and I was asked to write a history of the organization. A logical request: I'm a writer, a former Board member, a faithful National Symposium attendee and occasional speaker most of that span.

Forty years is a long time, a lot to digest. So I broke the journey's journal into manageable chunks, 10 years at a time. Every long trip should have rest stops. Three chapters are done; the fourth is checking its GPS.

This project has dredged up tons of memories, mostly good, some fairly awful. The good years when weather, speakers and attendance served up a perfect symposium and scintillating tours? Very satisfying. But serving on the board of a non-profit is a mixed bag, alternately heartening and frustrating. Budget meetings that drag on past midnight are definitely not pleasant duty.

There's an old analogy: A trade conference is like a swan on a pond. On the surface, everything glides gracefully. Below the surface, there's lots of kicking going on to keep things moving.

In a Doh! moment in Minneapolis, I smashed my cell phone and had to buy a replacement at (shudder) the Mall of America. I strongly dislike giant shopping malls and this one's America's biggest. It's not hell, but it's a strong candidate for purgatory.

In Philadelphia, an unscheduled rainstorm mired several buses up to their axles. In several cities, busted ACs left whole busloads of us soaked in sweat. Every year, speakers inspired, while others disappointed or, rarely, infuriated.

Over the years we toured hundreds of wonderful gardens, large and small, public and private. We toured state-of-the-art growers, mom-and-pops, and everything in between. Among the gardens, of course, there were some (mercifully few) mediocre or worse examples.

Somewhere in the Midwest I drove for an hour, eager to get my first glimpse of lewisia, a plant I'd become enamored of from pictures. And there it was—a lone, scraggly specimen in a pile of gravel. Well, they do demand near-perfect drainage ...

Another garden, farther west, featured hastily-assembled "planters" that turned out to be stacked tires disguised with slabs of bark.

There were tragic gardens. We met in Boston in July 2012. In October 2011, a freak storm slammed the East Coast. Heavy, wet snow felled or shattered trees from Maryland to Maine. Ergo, we strolled among once-lovely beds of hosta, astilbe and ferns shriveling like vampires in full sun because nothing was left of what had been their shade but the large stump they surrounded.

Some places leave you verklempt, like the rooftop garden of a children's hospital—stop me if you've heard this—where I opened a guestbook and read: "I love this garden. I was sitting in this garden the night the helicopter landed with my daughter's new heart." And ... I need a moment.

From the beginning, I learned that in any setting, any USDA zone, at any longitude, latitude or altitude, no matter how unfamiliar the flora, it's simply not possible to stump a whole busload of PPA members. Someone always knows what the rest of us are gaping at, mystified. At least one attendee can rattle off the genus, specific epithet and variety—and, often, tell us why they evicted it from their own garden last year.

My most sobering self-assigned task could not, in good conscience, be bypassed: A tribute to members, including several good friends, who are no longer among us. In the PPA's 40 years, according to my memory, helpful colleagues and Google, the bell has tolled for dozens of people who helped drive the association and the whole perennial industry forward. RIP to everyone listed and to those I inevitably missed.

As I type, the first three chapters are available on the PPA website, perennialplant.org. You don't have to be a member to read it. Just click About, then History and pick a decade.

As you read, the fourth chapter should be posted, too, and the 2024 Symposium in Asheville, North Carolina, may be still going on, depending on when you got your GP and found your way to This Space.

It's been quite a trip. If you've read this far, you were probably there, too. **GP**

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