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The Perennial Perennial Conference

John Friel



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The Perennial Plant Conference in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, has educated, entertained and inspired perennial enthusiasts of every kind since 1983. I haven't missed many iterations. For better and for worse, I chose to Zoom this one.

Swarthmore draws an eclectic mix of professionals—designers, growers, propagators, writers, educators, landscapers—and dedicated home gardeners. It's a knowledgeable crowd. Woe betide the speaker who underestimates this audience.

This Space can't do justice to all six speakers at once. Let's recap a couple, save the rest for another day.

Eric Groft of the prestigious design firm Oehme, van Sweden (OvS) introduced his book "Beyond Bold." OvS created the New American Garden style in the 1970s, transforming not just landscapes but our very vision of what gardens should be. I never met James van Sweden, but I knew Wolfgang Oehme. Both passed more than a decade ago.

"Wolfie" delighted in playing Jiminy Cricket to anyone who sold perennials. I can still see him approaching my tradeshow booth, red pen and my marked-up catalog in hand, with an ear-to-ear maniacal grin and a gleam in his eye. I'm a nomenclature stickler, but no one could stickle like Wolfie.

I would remind him, to no avail, that catalogs are sales tools, not reference works. Products need to appear where buyers, not purists, think they belong. To list a best-seller as *Hylotelephium Herbstfreude* would make Wolfie happy, but your customers would wonder why on earth you'd dropped *Sedum Autumn Joy*. And they'd source it elsewhere.

But I digress. Back to Swarthmore.

The book-focused part of Groft's presentation felt uncomfortably like an infomercial. Once that passed, his images of projects both residential and institutional supplied exactly what such conferences should provide: A sense of grandeur, of scale beyond what most of us can do at home.

Designing museum gardens worldwide taught him that "nothing compares to England. Everything blooms there all the time. It's amazing." Similarly, his work and research in the Pacific Northwest confirmed what I've said for years: "Absolutely everything grows out there."

The counterweight to those botanical Nirvanas: Tippet Rise, a vast sculpture park and music venue on 10,000 rugged acres in Montana, where there are "three seasons: July, August and winter."

Somewhere in the mix is the White House Rose Garden, which Groft called “a national disgrace” when OvS was called in: “There were 12 roses, and they were not in the best shape.” Post-intervention, 250 rose bushes gleam in striking formal, geometrical patterns. The White House grounds in general? Also disgraceful: “No natives, no perennials, no diversity.” Gazing out into the crowd, he said, “We need to change that.”

Carrie Wiles, Interim Executive Director of the Delaware Center for Horticulture, titled her talk “Paradigm Shift: Growing for Ecological Endurance.”

Drawing on her years at native-specialist wholesale propagator North Creek Nurseries, Wiles offered a peek at how all that beautiful stuff magically ends up on a nearby retail shelf. Half a dozen people in the audience might possibly have delivered that part of the presentation, albeit far less charmingly. But the rest probably learned a lot.

In Carrie’s words, the nation’s growers taken as a whole are “a well-oiled machine” that “make(s) it look effortless, from propagation to shipping.” We all know better: Crafting cookie-cutter-uniformity from start to finish is anything but effortless. Tremendous hands-on attention goes into every step of the process that culminates in beautiful gardens and landscapes.

She touched on an important human aspect of the plant world: The stories and the people behind notable introductions like Phlox David, named by F.M. Mooberry for her husband, and Aquilegia Corbett, discovered by two teen-aged brothers.

The titular paradigm shift lies in the decisions behind new plant purchases and introductions, which increasingly embody ecological considerations: Climate change, pollinators, sustainability. She exulted, “We’re healing the planet with plants. ‘Earth’ and ‘heart’ use the same letters.”

That’ll do for now, but the other panelists merit attention, too. Stay tuned. **GP**

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