greenPROFIT

Friel World

3/1/2025

MANTS: Where the Season Starts

John Friel



For the umpteenth time, This Space spent a January day roaming miles of aisles at the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS), a horticultural touchstone for 55 years. It was well worth the trip to Baltimore.

For the first time, I was asked, “Why are you here? Aren’t you retired?” Old friend Kirk Brown fumed on Facebook that someone accosted him, too: “What are you doing here? You’re retired! You don’t have to do this anymore!”

Kirk—gardener, writer, speaker, actor—is seldom at a loss for words. He retorted with six reasons. For starters, unlike me, he’s NOT retired.

His reasons, like mine, blended business and personal: saw old friends, made new ones, had great dinners, landed a speaking gig, found things to write about, scored samples, literature and swag. (I finally got one of those cool square yardsticks from Manor View Farm.)

Mostly, I simply like hort events, especially this one. I’ve attended, exhibited and/or spoken at trade shows, expos, symposia and conferences, in 20-plus states and three foreign countries. MANTS stands out—largely because of its optimistic attitude.

The mood on the floor is consistently upbeat—and why not? It’s early. Unless you’re still rebuilding from last year’s storms, nothing terrible has happened yet. There’s every reason to be hopeful, even confident, about spring and beyond. For growers up and down the eastern seaboard and surprisingly far west, MANTS is where the season starts.

Show notes

I’m impressed by the battery-powered machinery boom. A new player: Pellenc, a 50-year-old French company now targeting U.S. markets. A salesman demonstrated a backpack blower—heavier, but far quieter and more vibration-free than gas-powered models—which, he reminded us, are being banned or restricted in multiple states. We’ll see how that plays out under a new, fossil-fuel loving administration, but viva voltage!

It was good to catch up with David Culp, signing copies of his popular book “The Layered Garden.” Maryland wholesaler Cavano’s Perennials produces and promotes The Brandywine Collection, i.e., plants trialed at David’s home—which has hosted Perennial Plant Association tours and which Martha Stewart has featured. The collection is also offered by home-delivery retailer Bloombox, profiled here last year.

Brands are everywhere. There’s a colorful new problem-solving marketing program down every other aisle.

This particular show may not pertain to your business. But if you're involved in sales and marketing like I was—mostly in wholesale, as you'll have gathered by now—you learn to like, and work, whatever trade event has impact in your bailiwick. Fortunately, there's plenty to like and even more to learn. I've learned:

If you never get out, if the only product you see is your own, you really don't know if it's any good. A show obliterates that tunnel vision. Your competitors' offerings are right there, toe-to-toe with yours.

Customers rarely call your office to applaud their latest shipment. Feedback usually means trouble: Damage, bugs, shortages. It's easy to start thinking bad thoughts about your stuff. But they WILL visit your trade show booth to compliment your products and service. It's heartening.

Ours is an industry built on relationships. We don't care for corporate monoliths; we prefer people. Interface? No, we want face-to-face.

But therein lies a modern conundrum. F2F and real life were once synonyms. But in sales, RL now means online or on the phone. Orders flow through brokers' and vendors' computers with less and less human input. You might get more F2F at a three-day show than in the other 362 days of the year. A trade show is definitely not RL, but it is real work. And a good one really does work.

So that's why I was there. In hindsight, the query implies that those who posed it weren't there by choice, as Kirk and I were, and would rather be elsewhere. If so, shouldn't they ask that question of themselves? **GP**

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