

3/28/2025

A Ticket to the Future

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Well, they've done it again—"they" being the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society and "it" being the Philadelphia Flower Show. Nobody does it better and I say that only partly out of regional pride.

I attended on Day 1, a PHS members (and guests) preview, so attendance was far lighter than the usual crush. The judging team, including members from Europe and Asia, was assessing the competition section. I encountered just a few friends, but missed several whose presence I learned of later via Facebook posts. Even with a thinned crowd, it's a big show.

A mix of talented designers, regional, national and international, put various spins on this year's theme, "Gardens of Tomorrow." Some, like "Nexus," envisioned dystopian urban spaces, with plants seemingly on life-support among concrete canyons. Others evoked a kinder, ecology-minded future. Apiary Studios' "Grass Stains" pointed out that tomorrow's gardeners are children now. Futuristic kid-size clothing fluttered in the breeze on retro clotheslines.

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Another retro touch: Geodesic domes, housing PlantPOP, creation of fellow GP columnist Art Parkerson. Like last year, I was mesmerized by closeup, time-lapse photography of flowers—hosta, crocosmia and more—bursting open from tight bud to full glorious bloom.

Gardening has been called the slowest of the performing arts. When something that actually takes hours happens larger than life, right in front of you in seconds, the garden itself becomes the performer. Art's home base, Lancaster Farms in Virginia, is probably America's only nursery-based stop-action studio.

A favorite: "Tomorrow's Eden," a large, intriguing, multilevel woodsy environment by Ishihara Kazuyuki studios of Japan and Oregon. Contained by a meticulously pieced dry-stone wall draped with carpets of moss, a waterfall and two ponds meandered among trees and tall structures of interwoven roots.

In a smaller wooded scape by Laurel-Brook Gardens, with a tree frog soundtrack, levitating trees hovered mysteriously over a misty pond, surrounded by a border wall of neatly stacked split wood. I couldn't help calculating the cordage.

The most whimsical installation, “Welcoming Nature Home,” starred fantastic oversized creatures—turtle, honeybee, hummingbird, squirrel, butterfly—all crafted of plant material, surrounding a candlelit dining table overflowing with flowers.

Each year’s scenery changes dramatically, but some mainstays are perennial. The rapture on visitors’ faces; the over-the-top displays; the miraculous flowering of plants that won’t bloom in the real world for months; and, of course, plants you’ve never seen before, used in ways you’ll probably never see again except perhaps in the garden of someone who saw it here. Even the shameless commerce section—i.e., the Marketplace—where hucksters hawk a mind-boggling array of home/garden-related goods, is fun to wander.

As you’d expect at a world-class horticultural expo, the plant palette is impressively broad. From anigozanthos to zinnia, aquatics to cacti, perennial to tropical, native or exotic, it was probably there somewhere. One noticeable change through the years, here and everywhere, is the abundance and ubiquity of orchids. Once the provenance of specialists and aficionados, that family is now available to everyman thanks to modern breeding creating and meeting demand.

My favorite unfamiliar plant was a striking plectranthus. From the “Cape Angels” hybrid series bred in South Africa, it featured dark, semi-succulent leaves and columns of deep pink/purple flowers. If I find it locally, it’s going into a deck planter this spring. A Swedish ivy relative kept out of direct sun should be pretty low-maintenance, right? Hope so.

You know those high-fashion shows where supermodels stalk the runway in whiplash-inducing styles that will never appear anywhere else on anyone? The edgier exhibits at PFS represent the plant kingdom’s version of such extravaganzas. Your HOA would frown on much of what these designers envisioned—including the clothesline.

But isn’t that the beauty of such events? Or for that matter, of public gardens, conservatories, sculpture gardens? It’s not just a plant zoo; it’s life writ larger than life, the embodiment of the brainstorm of creative, slightly crazy people thinking out loud, in living color and 3D.

OK, you can’t do this in your garden or even your garden center. But maybe you can do that—or something like it. It’s hard to stroll these exuberant acres and not take something home to try. See you there next year. **GP**

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