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## Retail Realities

*John Friel*

Most springs, I visit a big box and an IGC or two, just to see what's out there in each realm. I rarely come home empty-handed. This year's trip yielded A) two salvia varieties, so my hummingbird guests get something more nutritious than sugar water; and B) results both predictable and surprising.

Test subjects: Lowe's in Lancaster, followed by Fisher's Greenhouse in Strasburg and Groff's Plant Farm in Kirkwood.

The Plain Sect owners at Fisher's have spiffed up and modernized a range that grew carnations post-WWII. Later, it produced fuchsias and New Guinea impatiens for Green Leaf, whose recent sale will leave a void in the starter market come fall. It feels like the end of an era: I worked for Green Leaf for over 30 years, then for one of the dozen nurseries it spawned.

But I digress. Back to Fisher's. My industrious Amish and Mennonite neighbors make fascinating pragmatic selections from available technology while keeping the "English" world at arm's length. In the well-stocked store, which doesn't take credit cards, ceiling fans and lights operate sans electricity. Brands crowd the benches: Proven Winners, Sun Parasol, All-America Selections Winners, Terra Nova's Forever Heuchera, etc. It's a clean, well-organized, full-service nursery.

At Groff's Plant Farm, by contrast, don't expect doodads and squirrel repellents; it's all about plants. A cheerful rustic ambiance imbues the place, carved into the river hills: sloping gravel paths, homemade benching, squeaky-clean porta-potties.

The printed signage is thorough, descriptive and informative, with Latin nomenclature, hardiness zones, light needs and companion suggestions. Hand-written empirical assessments are refreshingly candid, e.g., *Salvia* Black and Bloom: "... supposed to be shorter than 'Black and Blue' but still reaches 3 to 4 ft." A should-be yellow echinacea bears this disclaimer: "Some are starting to bloom red instead."

Which fits the indie mojo, right? The family's history in ag/hort goes much deeper, but Groff's opened in 1993 with five greenhouses. Now, there are 28, plus expansive outdoor benching. They've hosted multiple Perennial Plant Association tours.

Founder Carlton Groff's daughter Kris Barry and husband Jon run the business. Kris greeted me with a cheerful, "How are you enjoying retirement?" We discussed Green Leaf's impending disappearance; she expects difficulty

finding some items. She chafed at certain branding requirements, like mandatory pots that dry out quickly, but shrugged: "Farmers are a little contrarian."

It would make a weird Venn diagram to plot independents' versus box stores' markets and M.O.s. They overlap a lot, and then again they don't. If one criterion is variety, the IGC's circle dwarfs that of the big guys. Predictable, yes. But the gap gapes.

Lowe's had just three varieties of hosta and heuchera. Groff's? Nearly 100 and about 40, respectively. Surprisingly, Lowe's had agapanthus. A landscape staple out West, it's still exotic here. Groff's counters with esoterica and ephemera: three species of trillium, hardy bleilla orchids, asarum, dodecatheon and dozens of grasses.

Granted, my recon came pre-Mother's Day before Lowe's really ramped up. But no matter when in the season you check, the variety gap will remain. That's OK: Different business models need different product lines.

I'm not anti-big. I shop at Lowe's; I've given, received and spent Lowe's gift cards. So why does it bug me a little that when Gen X and successors hear "garden center," they picture Lowe's? Maybe I'm spoiled: PA boasts some marvelous IGCs, and many Amish farmstands sell annuals, perennials or flowers cut fresh that morning. More urban areas lack such luxuries.

An amusing overlap: Birds. Not just seed and feeders, but actual resident avians. At Groff's, a mother robin fed a nestful of tiny gaping beaks. Haven't seen that at the boxes, but we've all seen birds there. Sparrows have even learned to hover in front of motion detectors, opening doors so they can dart in.

They've figured it out. They've adapted. **GP**

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