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Flight Routes, Deep Roots

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Two out of three ain't bad. Three for three feels even better.

I recently achieved three goals in a single trip. Target #1 was the oldest: To set foot in all 48 contiguous States. The others were more modest: To lay eyes on new bird species, and visit a new garden center or nursery. And write about it because, hey, deductibility is a desirable side-effect, right? Ask me in April if my tax advisor went for it.

Destination: Montana, 48th on the checklist. I should've visited sooner; it's a beauty. There's that western "scale" thing: Montana is three times the size of my home state, PA, which is actually pretty big.

Goal #2 fell thanks to Wings Across the Big Sky. This year's traveling Audubon Society event, tied to bird migrations, was in Missoula, the setting for one of the prettiest movies ever, "A River Runs Through It." No trick photography needed, it's a gorgeous part of the world, with the snow-capped Bitterroot Mountains gleaming on the horizon. And, wow, there were birds, from America's smallest, the Calliope Hummingbird, to one of the largest, the Great Gray Owl. By trip's end, my life-list had grown by 26 species that I'll almost certainly never see at home.

Goal #3 was consummated at Caras Nursery, where I chatted with owner Bill Caras. Missoula has called itself the Garden City since 1869—20 years before statehood. In 1896, the site was home to Missoula Nursery. James K. Caras bought it in 1920; son James S. Caras renamed it in the 1960s. HIS son Bill took over in the 1970s and oversaw dramatic expansion and modernization.

On a warm Friday afternoon, the parking lot was nearly full and business brisk. Caras carries a broad range of fruit and ornamental trees, plus a wide array of annuals, edibles, herbs, and my favorites, perennials and grasses. There were 10 varieties of geraniums—true perennial geraniums, not those annual imposter pelargoniums. You rarely see so many in the U.S. England, yes, but it's unusual here.

Pot tags bore familiar names: Little Prince of Oregon, Blooming Nursery, Chick Charms succulents and the ubiquitous PW. There were also new ones, like Great Bear Native Plants, Hamilton, Montana.

At 71, nearing half a century in the business, Bill looks significantly younger and still works on landscape jobs. I

congratulated him on the great appearance of the place, much of which he designed, and on heading up a multi-generation operation.

Every year, family-owned businesses fold or leave family hands. Kids who grew up watching Mom and Dad struggle every day often decide they want something else for themselves. Nursery owners spend sleepless nights pondering exit strategies.

So it's heartwarming to encounter a business that's been what it is, where it is and whose it is for over a century. General Manager David Caras, Bill's son, represents the fourth generation. "It's been an adventure," Bill said with a smile.

I also met some cheerful, helpful employees. Greenhouse Manager Amy Keil hails from a long-established Long Island horticultural family. Nursery Yard Manager Travis Elliott, a 13-year veteran, schooled me on key regional facts—like, you can count on just 90 frost-free days most years. Missoula, at 3,200 ft., is officially in USDA Zone 5b. The sun is strong, the humidity low. Depending on a specific site's exposure and altitude, Travis advises some gardeners to plant for Zone 4 or even 3.

Educational seminars for customers run in April and June. May is just too busy. Fortunately, given that 90-day window, "We had a good May," said Bill.

Bill spoke of earlier years when "you couldn't ship a lot in" to such a remote area. Trees were bareroot; shrubs came from "can yards," rootbound in actual steel cans that had to be snipped off, leaving razor-sharp edges. Even now, Amy said, they "have to order a lot" to meet long-haul minimums.

Driving around town I'd passed new-looking Lowe's, Home Depot and Walmart locations, all with garden centers. I asked how the competition affected Caras. Bill shrugged, "We just try to do our own thing. For me, it's always been about the plants."

Amen.

Onward to Alaska and Hawaii! I hear they have birds. **GP**

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