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MANTS: Friendly Ghosts

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This column was supposed to be strictly about the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS), which deserves every word; as I've said before, it's where the season starts in this part of the world. But unexpected connections made some aisles feel like Memory Lane.

First stop: Creek Hill Nursery, because it's near the entrance and I had a coat to stash. President Ross Strasko, son of founder and old friend Ron, showed off a favorite new intro: Liatris ligulistylis Butterfly Magnet. This seed strain of a prairie native allegedly produces a pheromone that "attracts male Monarch butterflies like a magnet," according to the breeder, Brent Horvath of Intrinsic Perennials. It debuted in 2018, but this was my first encounter. Intrinsic's genetics are getting around; at MANTS alone, their intros were represented by at least four growers.

Naturally, I visited my alma mater, Emerald Coast Growers, for hugs and catching up. ECG's catalog contains an eye-catching catmint with an eyeroll-inducing name, Nepeta Chartreuse on the Loose. Chartreuse foliage is simultaneously a uniter and a divisive element. In the garden, it serves as an accent or a buffer of sorts, almost like silver or amber. But not everyone is a fan and not all yellow/green foliage is created equal. Sometimes it's striking, sometimes it looks like your injector is on strike. This one appears to be on the good side of that divide.

At Must Have Perennials, I spoke with General Manager Justin Wisniewski and Sales Manager Kris Smith. Now a Ball entity by way of Outback Plants, Must Have is the erstwhile Blooms of Bressingham. It was good to see the Blooms legacy honored in their catalog (which contains pictures I took while Yoder Brothers owned the brand) because the family had such a great story, a long tradition of innovation.

Alan and Adrian Bloom were the most notable father and son in British horticulture since the elder and younger John Tradescants in the 17th century. Their nursery won dozens of Gold Medals at the Chelsea Flower Show—probably the only event that deserves mentioning in the same breath as the Philadelphia Flower Show, which will be happening about the time you read this.

Alan received the Victoria Medal of Honour; he and Adrian both earned the Perennial Plant Association's highest honor, the Award of Merit. When I visited in 1996, the nursery bore a plaque boasting, "By Appointment to Her Majesty the Queen," which of course would need a gender update now.

Among Must Have's breeding partners are some familiar names. A pleasant surprise: Juniper Level Botanic Garden in North Carolina, an offshoot of Plant Delights Nursery, founded by Tony Avent, breeder, nurseryman, author, lecturer, provocateur. Plant Delights has hosted at least two PPA national symposium tours. And then there's the aforementioned Brent Horvath of Intrinsic Perennials, who shares a singular distinction with Blooms: They're the only breeding entities to have introduced two Perennial Plant of the Year winners. Blooms gave us Astilbe Sprite (1994) and Geranium Rozanne (2008). Intrinsic launched Rudbeckia American Gold Rush (2023) and this year's winner, Andropogon Black Hawks.

Another stop: Aris/Green Leaf. Once a multinational firm with growing locations in the states, Europe, Africa, Canada and later South America, the company formerly known as Yoder Brothers now produces crops only in Florida. Some Green Leaf perennial starter production shifted there after the PA greenhouses were sold. Time will tell if the transplant takes—some plants do well in FL, some don't—but the samples looked very good.

Holding down the PPA booth was President Ed Lyon. Among the association's upcoming events is its Spring Symposium at Elm Bank in Wellesley, Massachusetts, home of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. I've attended and presented there, and in 2007 I spent two sweltering days on the grounds photographing the installation of a large, Adrian Bloom-designed garden. It was a fun gig despite the heat. A small army of yellow-shirted volunteers followed Adrian's every move as he directed plantings, pointing, exhorting and gesturing like a conductor playing his orchestra.

As always, MANTS was well worth the drive to Baltimore and back home. It's great to have such an excellent, upbeat event available as a day trip. Hope to see you there in '27. **GP**

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