greenPROFIT

Friel World

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Magic, Near and Far

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This Space is sort of a monthly postcard from the recent past. This time, make it two cards from March: A big one from the Philadelphia Flower Show, and a smaller one from Iceland.

Walking into PFS always induces a few minutes of sensory overload. The scale, the colors, the intricate floral structures soaring overhead, the oohing and aahing crowd—it's all too much, too suddenly, especially the colors your winter-weary eyes have all but forgotten. You'd think I'd be immune after decades of such immersions, but every year it still freezes me in my tracks, gawking and grinning like a fool until I realize I'm photobombing somebody.

Each year since the show's inception, when visitors saw Poinsettias for the first time, there are either new plants or familiar genera used in trippy new ways. Among 2026's more unusual adornments were boatloads of Anthurium flowers and Sarracenia trumpets and blooms. Orchids, once a trace element, have become such a staple that they're no longer remarkable—which is in itself remarkable, but it tracks with the oddity-to-commodity metamorphosis of orchids over the last decade.

PFS is always part window into the future, part mirror to the past. Designer Kelly Norris made his debut last year with a striking tableau: a vacant city lot taken over by wild growth. His award-winning 2026 entry American Anemoia was a softer space with similar undertones of abandonment, a garden gone feral in its gardener's absence. An ancient, rusted-solid lawnmower stood like a sculpture amid the conquering foliage. Urban or rural, Nature bats last.

If, like me, you wondered what Anemoia is, it's a relatively recent coinage meaning nostalgia for a time or place you never really knew. Another neologist, probably the best ever, was celebrated just a few steps away in an entire corner dedicated to William Shakespeare, complete with life-size actors and the Bard himself, all made from and clad in plant materials.

PlantPOP (helmed by columnist Art Parkerson) was back with its trademark time-lapse photography of flowers opening, the patient dance of the garden at warp speed. This year's video also featured interviews with two celebrated plantsmen. It was a pleasure to see the late Dr. Darrell Apps, old friend and world-class daylily breeder eulogized here last year, recalling the history of Hemerocallis's introduction to America and subsequent migration to just about everywhere. It's probably our most attractive and profitable Asian invasive.

Next up: William Radler, developer of the Knock Out rose line—the ca. 2000 breakthrough that promised you a rose garden, and kept its promise. May 8 has been declared National Knock Out Rose Day at Radler Rosarium in Wisconsin.

Even the simpler designs, like a French bistro table bearing glasses of wine, surrounded by bouquets and sitting in the shadow of a cleverly-rendered fragment of the Eiffel Tower, brought a smile.

A minor quibble, which not everyone will share: When did designers decide that sawed-off white birch sticks were pretty things worthy of inclusion in plantings and containers? They're everywhere—even here, where designers are expected to do the unexpected. OK, they were larger than most, more like trunks than sticks, but a big amputated cliché is still a cliché. Let those poor trees grow.

Which brings us to Iceland. It still seems odd that, having survived a particularly brutal Pennsylvania winter, I volunteered for more cold weather. I could say I tried to sign up for Ireland, and there was a typo… but no, the destination was always Iceland, and it was like nothing else I've seen. Straddling two tectonic plates, prone to volcanic eruptions and 80+ earthquakes a day, Iceland sees land created and destroyed faster than anywhere else on the planet. Northern Lights? Yes, almost every night.

Time did not permit a visit to any of the greenhouses we passed, where cheap geothermal heat and electricity produce tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, herbs and more. The most amazing crop? That's bananas! Despite taking two years to ripen, they were grown commercially from 1940 until 1958, when fruit tariffs ended and domestics couldn't compete with imports. They're still grown, but only at the Ag University where students and staff eat them.

I had wonderful times. You should've been there. **GP**

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