greenPROFIT

Friel World

6/1/2026

Microcosmic

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My horticultural event agenda has, predictably, dwindled since retirement. At its peak around Y2K, traveling to trade shows, association meetings, symposia and speaking gigs, I passed through 14 airports one year and fancied myself a seasoned road warrior. Then I met a Dutch sales rep whose territory was the Pacific Rim and felt like a homebody.

That's quite all right: Flying has lost most of its charm. My green industries interface consists of two mega-events, MANTS and the Philadelphia Flower Show, some gardening, and a small but growing number of smaller shindigs. Recent months brought two pleasant half-day trips near home: The Pennsylvania Herb Fair in York and the MT Earth Fest, formerly the Lancaster Herb Fair.

Such gatherings are sort of retail-focused microcosms of larger ones. Like the nationals, they started as plants-only events and gradually attracted myriad tangential entities. The herb fair in York featured pots of herbs, including turmeric, the International Herb Association's 2026 Herb of the Year. There were also perennials, natives, some ornamentals and numerous ag/hort-related products.

My neighbor was there literally minding her own beeswax, hawking products from her hives. Other booths offered local farm-produced candies, ice cream, licorice and pretzels. All the above are to be expected in that setting, but I was also accosted by folks eager to replace my windows, and/or remodel my kitchen and bathroom.

The Lancaster County event changed names, but the herbal relationship to sorcery lingers. Potions, infusions, sachets and potpourri were on offer. One booth shared information on Baba Yaga, a witch-like creature from Slavic folklore whose story apparently involves chicken feet and salt.

I found it quite reminiscent of larger industry events. The erstwhile PANTS had multiple aisles devoted to the gaudiest schlock any nursery could ever stock. Even IPM Essen in Germany, reputedly the world's largest hort event, featured odd furry objects whose purpose, origin and relevance escaped me. But I digress.

The two-day York event also featured speakers. Joseph Kiefer of Triple Oaks Nursery and Herb Garden in New Jersey delivered an informative talk on a perennially popular topic: "Native Plants for Pollinators."

I learned that hummingbirds love jewel weed, which I'd thought was of interest only as a poison ivy antidote. I nodded when he declared himself "not an extremist" where native plants and even insects are concerned, e.g., honeybees. No, they're not indigenous, but they've called America home since the 1600s—far longer than my clan—and "they're here. They're part of nature."

Joseph gave a shout-out to the 2024 PPA Perennial Plant of the Year, Phlox paniculata Jeanna, and to the plant trials at Mt. Cuba, Delaware's marvelous all-natives public garden, where Jeanna was also a winner.

A surprising takeaway: It's "selfish" to grow plants solely for one's own pleasure, not considering how they relate to the natural world around them. I'd never thought of gardening as "selfish." Gardeners are famously generous, happy to share plants, knowledge and time.

But it's a thought worth thinking: Since at least Gen X, gardeners have asked, "OK, it's pretty. What else does it do?" Borders, even window boxes, can and perhaps should do more than make their creator smile. There are higher purposes than curb appeal, like offering something essential—food, shelter, nesting material—to birds and insects.

My favorite aspect of this presentation? Every picture showed a bug or bugs interacting with a flower or leaf, feeding on plants and/or furthering their reproductive cycles. When I started photographing flowers for catalogs, any bugs but butterflies were absolutely fauna non grata. It's gratifying to see them accepted where they once would fall victim to swatters or insecticides.

Speaking with Joseph afterwards, I found, not surprisingly, that we knew many of the same people—customers, friends, competitors. This business's special charm is that one person or company can fit all three categories. More than anything else, that's what keeps me seeking such events. **GP**

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