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Brand New, Brand Old

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This Space has gotten into the habit of visiting a big box store (or two) and an IGC (or more) at least once each spring. It's instructive and it's good for the economy since I rarely leave empty-handed.

This Space has also ruminated on the proliferation of brands in recent years. Once upon a time, Editor-In-Chief Chris Beytes convened a panel of actual gardeners at the OFA Short Course, now Cultivate, and grilled them on their gardening practices. These were serious green thumbs who yearly spent hundreds, sometimes thousands, on their habit.

But when Chris asked what plant brands they were familiar with? Crickets. They were stumped. "Brands?" someone asked.

Today, that panel would probably pepper Chris with copyrighted names. Logos dominate the retail space in boxes and indies alike. The difference, slow and gradual in the making, is quite striking.

Early in my hort career, brands were scarce. While delivering to plant stores and nurseries, I'd see baskets labeled Exotic Angel, now owned by Costa Farms, or Star Roses from Conard-Pyle, or Monrovia shrubs. My employer propagated Mikkelsen New Guinea Impatiens. There weren't many other examples in my purview until along came Proven Winners, and retail hort slowly evolved to its current condition, where unbranded pots look sort of … naked.

You expect brands at box stores. Some intriguing monikers at Big Orange:

- The ubiquitous PW, which scores points with me by sponsoring a favorite NPR program.
- Arizona East LLC succulents and cacti. Based in New Jersey, the line includes tropicals, bromeliads and orchids.
- Rio Dipladenia, from Fernlea Flowers LTD, Canada. This genus is often confused with the related, but touchier, Mandevilla. The internet, always a wealth of ambiguity, runs true to form here.
- Smart Planet hardy cacti from Western succulent giant Altman Plants (tagline: "Sustainable Gardening").
- PURE Succulents & Cactus, by Plainview Growers, New Jersey. Nifty wood labels.

- Row upon row of perennials, like gorgeous Aurora Blue Delphinium, from North Carolina's massive Metrolina Greenhouses.

The shelves at this year's IGC, Gateway Garden Center in Delaware, also brandished brands, albeit different ones:

- American Beauties: A given, since Gateway's co-owner Steve Castorani co-founded it. Tagline: "Native plants that bring life to your garden," especially pollinators. Example: Monarda Judith's Fancy Fuchsia, selected for mildew resistance.
- The Mt. Cuba Collection, "Planting with Purpose." This du Pont estate turned public garden is dedicated to natives. Plants that excel in their rigorous trials, like that monarda, are worth trying.
- Bushel and Berry, nee BrazelBerry, a Star Roses & Plants brand since 2016. Smart name change. No offense, but "BrazelBerry" sounds like a Bronx cheer.
- Several brands that trace back to Centerton Nursery, New Jersey, now run by the third generation of the Blew family: Blew Label Perennials, Blew Label Natives and Bring Back the Butterflies. Centerton has 11 in-house brands and grows six nationals, like …

It bears mentioning that modern transportation enables this evolution. Most of these plants crossed state lines to reach those shelves. Some crossed most of the continent; the URCs and TCs that became them may have crossed oceans.

The brands mentioned here, and the plethora not included, have something in common with the plants they adorn: Those that work, and are nurtured, survive. The weak and neglected vanish. Many brands I dealt with as a marketing guy are on that second list. Remember Flower Falls or The Flower Fields? Crickets again.

Which reminds me that among my erstwhile side hustles was: Restaurant reviewer. How that occurred is a mystery; I've never even bussed a table. Nonetheless, I was paid to dish on dishes at many establishments that, like those long-faded brands, have disappeared.

Maybe it's me. If I owned a restaurant, I wouldn't let me in the door. **GP**

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