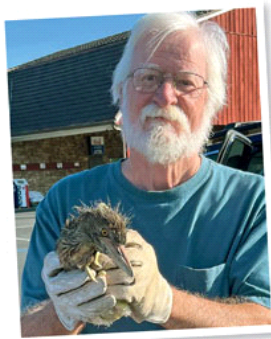


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Simmering Summer Potpourri

John Friel



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As I type, Cultivate looms in the near future; as you read, it's in your rear-view, but not mine. My 2026 industry-related itinerary consists of more local events.

First came Darwin Days at Star Roses & Plants in West Grove, Pennsylvania—always a good visit, with tours, lunch and familiar faces. Writing about it feels a bit too meta for comfort since the event and this publication are under the same corporate umbrella, but some excellent, new-to-me perennials bear mentioning, so comfort be damned.

Geranium sanguineum Purple Glow poses a serious challenge to the classic Rozanne. The flower is very different, but it's shorter and more floriferous, with a

uniform, mounding habit.

Panicum Dream Catcher series, especially Tumbleweed, whose spherical shape explains its name. Dream Catchers are bred for infertility, which will make gardeners smile and native purists frown.

Rosmarinus Blue Cascade is allegedly hardy to USDA Zone 6a, an eyebrow-raiser for this Mediterranean genus. If true, it should survive here in PA, even after a harsh winter.

Abandoning wholesale for retail, This Space prowled the end-of-season sale at Esbenshade's, a wholesale/retail grower with 16-plus acres of greenhouses and three garden centers near Lititz. They've generously hosted tours for PPA's national symposia and they were good customers of two former employers, so I'm not exactly impartial.

Live goods encompassed packs, pots and baskets of annuals, perennials, tropicals and shrubs. Hard goods included tools, containers, clothing, raised beds, soil, mulch, stone and fertilizer. On Day 4 things were pretty picked over, naturally, but shoppers were still filling carts.

I upgraded my gardening arsenal with long loppers by that Swiss company that starts with F, as I should've done years ago instead of buying an offbrand whose telescoping handles are more clumsy than useful. The KISS principle applies here.

But I digress.

Clearance sales are a two-edged sword, a necessary evil, a self-inflicted wound—but low prices still beat the Dumpster. There's always that nagging doubt: Could we have managed inventory better?

In many cases, no. Some people always hold out for deals, and even your steadiest customers, the gardeners and landscapers who help you make payroll all year, are out there browsing the red-tag racks, too.

Just a mile away, but at the distant end of the retail spectrum, was Rare Plant Palooza, a yearly pop-up with over two dozen booths. Product mix: Fewer orchids than expected, but many carnivorous plants, succulents like lithops and tropical cacti, oddball monstera, hoyas and bromeliads, including Cryptanthus, which I'd not seen in years.

The vendors sported equally exotic names: Odd Botany, The Plant Queen, Chaos Carnivorez, Dr. C's Greenhouse of Horror. Many don't have physical storefronts. One told me, "It's just whatever I can grow in my basement." Sagebrush Shack in Gettysburg is a brick-and-mortar, but with no greenhouse, necessitating frequent shopping trips.

Remember that guy at college, the small-time weed dealer who'd buy a pound and sell just enough so he could smoke free? There's a whiff of that vibe around this kind of event. Not the product, the business model: Somebody's habit—sorry, hobby—reached a point where they had to generate cash flow to sustain it.

Solutions: Facebook Marketplace, eBay, Palmstreet (a new website to me) and pop-ups. Some sell online reluctantly; one said, "I don't really like it because there's no feedback. I prefer talking to people face-to-face." Others sell in-person only, either by preference or because, one shrugged, "I haven't figured out how to ship these weird little things and keep them alive."

Later this month comes Penn State's Flower Trials Field Day in Landisville. Should be interesting: We've had brutal heat followed by powerful storms causing widespread tree damage and power outages. Did some trials result in a death sentence? Stay tuned.

Meanwhile, the damned spotted lanternflies are back. I've already swatted more than I saw all last year, probably due in part to some nearby Tree of Heaven sprouts. Time to break in those loppers. **GP**

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