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PPA: Notes, Quotes and Anecdotes

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In late July, I attended the Perennial Plant Association's National Symposium, as I have every year since, whoa, 1987. Here's a potpourri of highlights from the Denver iteration:

- PPA is poised at the cusp of major change: After 34 years as the only Executive Director the Association has ever known, co-founder Dr. Steven Still is retiring. Alan Bush's retrospective tribute capped an outpouring of gratitude from the assembled members for the Still family's innumerable efforts on PPA's behalf.
- Dan Heims, Terra Nova Nurseries' founder, received—fittingly—the Award of Merit, PPA's highest honor. TN's introductions have revolutionized several genera. In a gracious acceptance speech, Dan said, "PPA isn't about plants. It's about people." True, but incomplete: It's about people who are all about plants and Dan is the type species. To describe his hunger for new flora, he evokes his ancestral Russian: "Nooshnah," a need as essential as water or oxygen.
- Dan lamented, "The average age of a grower in America is 58. That's a problem." Solution: Cavano's Perennials in Maryland earned the Grower Award and put its money where it counts. Owner Ferenc Kiss has sponsored young attendees to several consecutive Symposia.
- Plant pioneer Panayoti Kelaidis captured the industry's global footprint in one plant, *delosperma*: New varieties of this African genus are crafted for North American markets by a Japanese breeder working in Peru for a Dutch grower.
- The many excellent speakers included Mike Bone, Denver Botanic Gardens, who cautioned, "Don't put a gorilla in a dog cage"—an evocative version of the familiar "right plant, right place" mantra. Mike drew laughs with a wry remark about a plant in the crosshairs of restless taxonomists: "It's scheduled for genus reassignment surgery."
- Sadly, Colorado now has Japanese beetles. When a nurseryman said he'd emptied a trap at home five

times last year, I shared a nugget of eastern wisdom: Buy traps for your neighbors' yards, not yours.

- Entomologist, birder and naturalist Dave Leatherman showed astonishing nature photography and warned, "Squirrels will inherit the earth."
- Brent Heath of Brent & Becky's Bulbs introduced 2018's Perennial Plant of the Year, *Allium Millennium*, with a tip on getting touchy species through winter: "Plants are like people. They like to sleep in dry beds."
- Tony Avent, a co-host of the 2018 Symposium in Raleigh, North Carolina, lavished his contagious enthusiasm on a lengthy list of new and overlooked perennials and grasses. He wholeheartedly endorsed *Millennium*, which he's grown for 17 years.
- Perennial Diva Stephanie Cohen scolded, "The climate is changing. Anyone who says it's not is irresponsible."
- Denver's climate, though violently bipolar, perfectly suits perennials that resent high humidity, e.g., *perovskia* and *achillea*. They're good in the Mid-Atlantic, but Colorado's? Wow! Far more vibrant, with brighter flowers and cleaner foliage.
- Xeriscaping back east has matured, but still waxes in dry years and wanes in wet. Here, where annual rainfall averages just 15 in. and sometimes drops below eight, water-wise plant choices are a constant.
- No association does tours like PPA. We visited greenhouses built in the 1940s and '50s to grow carnations and roses. But around 1970, California growers usurped that business, only to lose it to Colombia. Coloradans switched to vegetables, bedding plants—and perennials.

It was a lesson in horticulture's cyclical nature. My previous employer expanded rapidly in the '70s and '80s, first with annuals, then perennials, in erstwhile rose and carnation ranges in Pennsylvania—vacant because their market had migrated to Colorado. **GP**

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