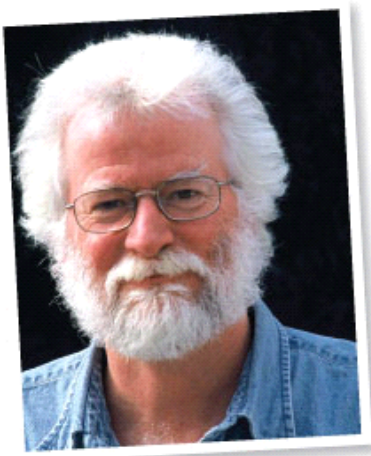


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Talking in a Winter Wonderland

John Friel



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As I type, the East Coast is setting unwelcome records at a record pace: Coldest day, coldest night, most consecutive days below freezing, most car batteries sold and a personal high in firewood consumed. Snow has fallen in Southern cities where kids had only seen it online. Yes, Minnesotans and Canadians, we know we give you lots to chuckle about. You're welcome.

Each winter, I confront the same conundrum. Looking at my cordwood I say, sometimes aloud: I worked hard for that wood. I chainsawed it, hauled it, split it, stacked it and sheltered it. I will NOT waste it!

Then the temperature drops. I eye my bins again and say, sometimes aloud: I earned that wood. I will NOT be cold!

That second voice always prevails. I went to great pains to gather all that xylem for one reason: to send it up my chimney. The late Ralph Cramer, cut-flower grower and fellow river rat, used to say, "It's not money until you spend it." We who heat our homes with dead trees have a parallel: It's not firewood until you burn it. Until it's in the stove releasing those pent-up BTUs, it's just exercise and yard ornamentation.

I pride myself on building symmetrical, eye-pleasing stacks that stand unsupported for a year or more. But no matter how perfectly I've piled them, when those billets reach their ultimate destination, the fire is always prettier. Let the flames begin!

Also, as I type, I'm about to embark on two hort excursions that will be history by the time you read this. The first is MANTS, the Mid-Atlantic's premier trade event, in Baltimore. MANTS tends to be a cheerful, upbeat gathering. It's the unofficial kickoff to the season, and for most of us, not much has gone wrong yet. I hope that's the case this year and I hope I saw you there. Immediately thereafter comes P.L.A.N.T., a joint PPA/ONLA event in Columbus, where I will have spoken about grasses. Yes, there's life in Ohio between Cultivates!

I look forward to the latter event for several reasons; driving all the way across Pennsylvania and halfway across Ohio in winter is not one of them. It's a chance to reconnect with colleagues, to learn a thing or two at MGIX, the trade show that starts the next day, and to share the stage with an old friend.

I grew up (I digress not, you'll see) near Philadelphia, pretty much oblivious to the area's botanical treasures. My family, with one exception, were not gardeners. I recall visiting Longwood Gardens; my memory says entry was free when I was a kid. But I can't find confirmation of that factoid and my memory is notoriously free-range.

There were also occasional trips to Star Roses to acquire new specimens for the exception: my rose-besotted Aunt Agnes, whose garden I occasionally, half-heartedly, helped her weed.

I assumed that wherever you lived there'd be a Longwood equivalent nearby. I had to grow up, move away and wander around the country to appreciate how ludicrous that notion was. The Delaware Valley is uniquely studded with horticultural gems and one of them isn't a garden. She's the aforementioned old friend and fellow speaker, Stephanie Cohen. Author, educator, designer and peripatetic lecturer, Stephanie has been a green industry fixture, not just around Philadelphia, but far beyond for decades. At 80, she's still booking talks.

Aunt Agnes is long gone, her rose garden a snow-covered shadow of its erstwhile glory; but I like to think she'd be proud of me just for knowing Stephanie.

Stay warm. If you've got it, burn it. **GP**

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