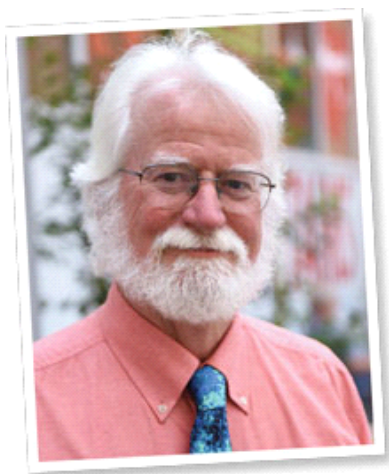


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Horizons & Rear-view Mirrors

John Friel



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F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” A similar quote, source unknown, says, “The test of a mature mind is the ability to tolerate paradox.” Either way, America’s gardeners have aced the test. The opposed ideas at play here: We care deeply about hardiness, except when we don’t care at all.

People get offended, even outraged, when plants touted as hardy don’t answer the bell in spring. Yet they nonchalantly dump summer planters when cold weather comes—even containers containing, say, heuchera, carex or grasses that could have overwintered happily and repeatedly had they gone into the ground, not the landfill.

A guy who pays \$50 for a dozen Valentine roses is delighted if they last a week. Two months later, he’s miffed because the \$8.00 perennial that flowered faithfully for five years finally met a winter it couldn’t handle. Half a C-note was a throwaway; eight bucks was an investment.

Such conundrums come to mind because A) this is the Money-Making Issue; and B) pundits have placed their bets on what’s hot in 2018 and beyond. Everybody, This Space included, expects succulents and other low-maintenance plants to remain popular and profitable. Ditto for native/pollinator gardening.

The Garden Media Group ups the ante, opining that gardeners are more accepting of the imperfections necessitated by planting for birds, bees and butterflies: Chewed leaves, spent flowers, lawns sprinkled with clover and (gasp!) dandelions, more tapestry than pool table.

Dr. Allan Armitage, noted pointer-out of what’s good and what’s next, recently issued his short list. Gaillardia, though admittedly short-lived, plays well in the Native and Water-Wise realms, delosperma fits nicely in the Succulent/Water-Wise category, and deer-proof helleborus in the Low-Maintenance niche. He also tagged carex and called heucherella “the next heuchera.”

All but helleborus fit the “opposed ideas” mold, defining an oxymoron that makes me squirm: Annualized perennials. My take on perennials is that hardiness is a defining characteristic—a reason, if not the reason, to buy. But breeders have made perennials more ornamental than ever, with longer flowering times, more container-friendly habits and highly decorative foliage. Paradoxically, those advances render them more apt to be seen as disposables.

Helleborus dodges the discard pile because it IS an investment of sorts, drawing a higher retail price than most same-size perennials. Poor heucherella is more at risk for an early demise because many make great hanging baskets—a format hardly synonymous with longevity.

Me, I expect continued interest in echinacea, especially as the market winnows out the weak. Darwin, Terra Nova and Plants Nouveau all have great offerings. I admire coneflowers with pom-pom tops, but pollinators can't access nectar and pollen through that fluffy, poodle-cut crown. Classic daisy forms should have more pull in the Native/Pollinator market.

I expect grasses to become ever more mainstream because nothing's easier. And I'm sensing a renaissance in hemerocallis, not that the daylily ever went away. It surely doesn't fit the growing native movement ... or does it? Generations of gardeners know wild H. fulva—an escaped Asian import—as part of America's summer landscape. Has it achieved honorary citizenship?

Your GC is proving all the above right or wrong right now. I hope you barely had time to read this. And I know trashing viable plants before their time is, regrettably, good business. Kill all you want, we'll grow more. But the paradox remains a pebble in my mind's shoe. Better work on more maturity while I'm still functioning. **GP**

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