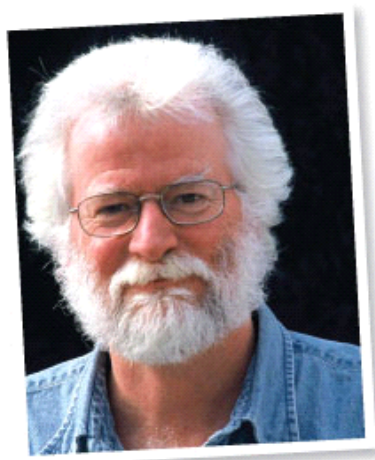


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Armchair Botanizing

John Friel



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Every October, without leaving Pennsylvania, I travel around the world in about eight hours, with a different itinerary each time. This year: lots of the U.S., two stops in England and a bit of Asia.

My travel agent is the Perennial Conference at Scott Arboretum, a.k.a. Swarthmore College. It's a rare interface where professional plantspersons—wholesalers, retailers, designers, writers—mingle with civilians, i.e., avid gardeners. Each group has this in common: They really know their plants.

I've rarely missed a PPC in 20 years and now have the honor of serving on the committee that puts the day together. Some years are better than others, naturally, but it's always a phenomenal time if you love hardy plants. The 2018 edition was among the best I can recall.

Mid-October Mid-Atlantic weather is a crapshoot, ranging from almost summery to crisp, colorful autumn to prematurely wintery. Best case scenario: During breaks, bundled or in shirtsleeves, you wander what's been called America's most beautiful campus. Back in the auditorium, world-class speakers from around the world or around the corner await to enthrall, inform, entertain and inspire.

England

Unless you're much luckier/richer/smarter than I am, you can't go everywhere you'd like. If I'd won that recent billion-dollar lottery I'd jet off to historic Gravetye Manor for dinner and further conversation with head gardener Tom Coward. I like a well-turned phrase and Tom did not disappoint.

"There is a fine line," he observed drily, "between a beautiful naturalistic planting and a tangled mess." He acknowledged "the irony in the ... work involved in making it look like the gardener has done nothing." Gravetye is the erstwhile home of designer/author William Robinson, the Irishman who taught the English to garden.

Whilst we're fantasizing about England and naturalistic plantings anyway, let's pop back to 2012 and see Nigel Dunnett's designs for Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Dunnett created a solid mile of jaw-dropping meadow-y perennial gardens, stitched together with bulbs and annuals, all in glorious flower for the 2012 London Games.

USA! USA!

Back in the States, back in semi-reality, Barbara McMackin's photos convinced me to add a 2019 side trip to her

“massive experiment.” Built on abandoned piers, Brooklyn Bridge Park spans 85 acres of gardens, meadows, copses, concert venues, trails and athletic fields, all on shallow engineered soils.

Lisa Roper has gardened at Chanticleer, a public garden near Philadelphia and one of the day’s sponsors, for nearly three decades, with stints in South Africa and England. She put her BFA skills and photography to good use explaining Chanticleer’s Gravel Garden, a striking, rock-ribbed dry slope overlooking a meadow and pond.

Paul Westervelt, a witty young Southern gentleman, oversees annual and perennial production encompassing 13 programs and 800+ varieties for a Virginia wholesaler. His presentation, “Are They Better or Just New?” answered the question increasingly asked by gardeners and professionals alike who’ve been burned by hotshot new intros that flamed out. He dissed one plant my employer grows, but praised many others.

Kelly Dodson and Sue Milliken of Far Reaches Farm call Port Townsend, Washington, home, but they roam far and wide—China, Vietnam, Australia, South America—to collect some of the damndest plants I’ve ever seen, in genera I’d never heard of like *Heteropolygonatum* and *Maianthemum*. Their “Plants Outside the Box (Store)” was a fun, informative presentation. My only criticism is that their slides didn’t include plant names.

If you’re reading this, you’re probably a professional plantsperson. Swarthmore is definitely an event to toss into your bucket. Bear in mind, it seats just 600 and usually sells out weeks in advance. Snooze & lose. **GP**

John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.