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Flower Power Rides Again

John Friel



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Diving into the Philadelphia Flower Show is usually a jaw-dropper. The designers strive for a kick-butt intro and nail it.

This year, that initial Wow! factor was somewhat lacking. But the farther in I got, the farther-out it got. The theme: Flower Power. If that sparks flashbacks, you're not alone. Like, Wow, man!

I didn't actually hear anyone say "groovy" or "psychedelic," but they'd fit the vibe. A booming soundtrack cycled through Beatles, Doors, Steppenwolf, Grateful Dead, Joe Cocker, Hendrix, The Band, Turtles, even a dash of Monkees. Rainbows and giant floral peace signs loomed large. Miniature VW buses, gaily painted, loomed small. One attendee sported tie-dye, another love beads. I saw no Nehru jackets or bell bottoms, but I was only there one day.

In short, it was pretty trippy. A whiff of weed wafting by would have seemed perfectly apropos. Once past the entrance, the '60s/'70s groove was shallower. Most displays were what PFS attendees expect: phenomenal, exotic, well-executed, educational and meticulously maintained.

My radar was naturally tuned to perennials and grasses, and I was not disappointed. The wizards who conjure flowers weeks, or even months, ahead of schedule had their A-game going. Easy genera, primula and helleborus, were in bodacious bloom in gardens large and small. But so were astilbe and hemerocallis.

There were hosta grown out to a size real gardeners won't see until June. Well done, Meadowbrook Farm, et al. It may not be nice to fool Mother Nature, but it's impressive, and in the dregs of a bitter winter, very welcome.

Grasses, sedges and rushes abounded: Dormant panicum, flowing *Carex pensylvanica*, glowing golden acorus, glaucous blue juncus, rich green sesleria. Equisetum-lined water features. Succulents go without saying.

A little background: In 1827, 80 farmers and others organized the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, which now boasts 27,000 members.

In 1829, their first show introduced attendees to an exotic new ornamental from south of the border, named for Ambassador to Mexico Joel Poinsett. Andrew Jackson, whom I once portrayed on stage (awful show, don't ask), was moving into the White House. New York had just abolished slavery.

Those 80 pioneer horticulturists dedicated themselves to "this interesting and highly influential branch of science." Is

there another field where art and science are so inextricable? To succeed, growers must master the latter discipline, but the former drives and inspires all we do. Sans science, our product can't reach the market alive. Sans art, sans mankind's unquenchable thirst for beauty, there's no market to reach.

PFS is to gardening what fashion runways are to women's clothing: Nobody wears that stuff in real life; no garden sports rotating cubes of bromeliads and mirrors in a black pond.

Today, PFS is America's largest, longest-running hort event, the world's biggest indoor flower show. The International Festivals and Events Association named it the Best Event in the World, topping the Tournament of Roses, Kentucky Derby Festival and Indianapolis 500 Festival. Pretty fast company.

Over nine days, a quarter of a million people ogle its 10 acres of displays and drop tons of money in its retail section, on everything from 99-cent kitchen gewgaws to high-end gazebos, sunrooms and landscape elements.

Sometimes, at consumer-oriented events, don't your years in the industry feel like a handicap? Where civilians see masses of pied glory, we see that one drooping petal, the props, the faint fertilizer residue.

I envy them a little, those civilians. But even after years backstage, even as a little magic rubs off, the mystique holds. The science peeks out from behind the curtain, but it can't overshadow the art.

Peace, baby. **GP**

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