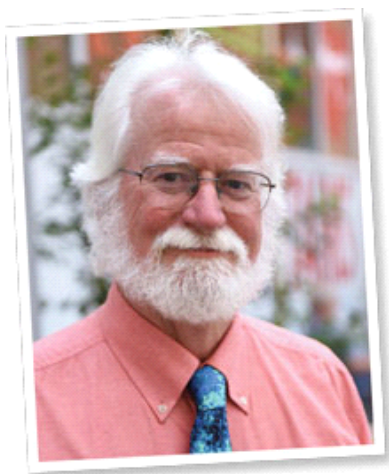


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Looking First, Leaping Anyway

John Friel



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Well, I can't say I didn't know what I was getting into. But I can say, I'd forgotten how much I was getting into, and how deep the immersion would be.

The "what" is next year's National Symposium of the Perennial Plant Association, held for the first time in my backyard, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

I attended my first PPA Symposium in 1987 in Baltimore. I've been a member since 1988, haven't missed a national, and have served on the Board, as a Regional Director and as President. I've helped plan symposia in numerous cities.

And yet somehow, perhaps mercifully, one forgets how many moving parts there are to a national event that brings hundreds of people together for nearly a week, with lectures, lunches, dinners, trade show and tours. I've

been out of that loop just long enough, apparently, that when friend and friendly competitor Ron Strasko asked me to co-Chair the Local Site Committee, I agreed immediately. What the heck? Sure, sign me up.

Maybe it was a few years of being just another guy on the bus that had me buffaloed. You know how industry gatherings go. You show up, check in, establish base camp at the hotel, greet old friends and everything else just happens—right? Speakers speak, buses roll, tote bags fill themselves, porta-potties magically appear at tour stops, coffee urns and trade show booths sprout like seedlings, box lunches descend like manna from above. Piece o'cake. As Nirvana sang, "Here we are now, entertain us!"

Reality is, alas, nothing like that little tunnel-vision vision. To paraphrase a phrase I've borrowed before, from a veteran organizer whose name I've forgotten: A trade conference is like a swan gliding across a pond. Viewed from above, all appears calm, smooth and effortless. But under the surface, there's a whole lotta kickin' going on to keep everything moving forward.

The PPA national is actually international. Attendees hail from multiple nations—some of which you'd expect, some not. The U.S. and Canada go without saying, as one says after saying what didn't need saying, and there are the usual European suspects like The Netherlands, England, France and Germany. But passports have also been stamped for PPA-bound plantaholics from Ireland, Turkey, Denmark, Switzerland, Finland, Belgium, South Africa, China, Japan and Israel. Plant people get around.

The common bond is, of course, that attendees have an innate love for hardy plants and/or a financial stake in

seeing that the category doesn't just survive, but thrives. Members fall into many stakeholder categories: Growers, of course, and retailers, but also a burgeoning population of designers, educators and writers—I mean, “communicators.” It's a daunting task to assemble an event that entertains and enlightens all.

Luckily, Ron and I have the assistance of a multi-talented, energized committee from the industry, academia and more. Luckily, the PPA has excellent leadership in the form of a seasoned, capable firm that specializes in organizing organizations, and a Board whose combined experience in horticulture add up to a number they'd probably be embarrassed to publish. The site committee is not alone.

If you've nothing better to do the first week of August 2020—and what could possibly be better?—mark your calendar now for Lancaster. You can't miss us. We'll be meeting right in the heart of a charming little city, listening to marvelous presenters, and touring and/or dining at world-class joints like Longwood Gardens and Chanticleer.

You can stay on the surface. You don't have to leap in and do any kicking. But you just might get the urge to do exactly that some year. **GP**

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