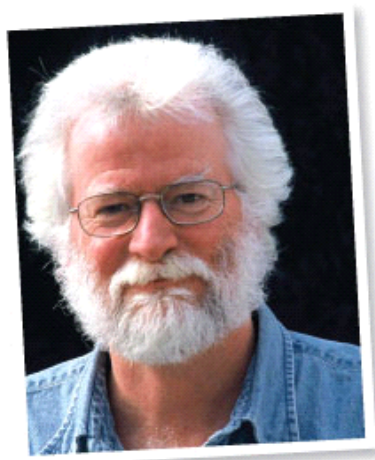


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Armchair Botanizing Redux

John Friel



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Just like this time last year, the recent Perennial Conference at Scott Arboretum, a.k.a. Swarthmore College, is fresh in my memory. 2019 marked the Conference's 30th year, with probably the most multicultural assembly ever. Speakers hailed from The Netherlands, Japan, Old England, New England, Colorado and Indiana. This space isn't sufficiently spacious to do them all justice, but let's try.

Jacqueline van der Kloet is famous for marrying bulbs and perennials for non-stop color. It seemed oxymoronic to hear her describe her "naturalistic" style while standing before images of boxwood and *Arborvitae* meticulously pruned to precise squares and spheres, but then, "natural" and "naturalistic" are not synonyms.

Those coiffed elements are living picture frames, the physical parameters of her canvas. Like paintings, gardens must begin and end somewhere. In between, selected elements of nature find homes and homage. Ergo, a garden is by definition a buffer between civilization and wilderness, where nature does as she's told. Right?

So I thought until **Midori Shintani** spoke. She oversees Tokachi Millennium Forest, a staggering 990-acre public park on Japan's northernmost island, set aside as a papermill's carbon offset. Her team's challenge: To tend and defend native vegetation, merging cultivated gardens into nature.

In the U.S., a century-old garden is considered very old. Asian planners think in numbers with commas in them. Midori's charming summation: "Less hand can be more knowledge."

Old friend **Irvin Etienne** shared lessons learned from managing the Gardens at Newfield, 152 acres of gardens and grounds surrounding the Indianapolis Museum of Art. He was surprised, as was I, at "all the overlaps" among perennials mentioned by speakers from around the globe. By my casual count, over a dozen Perennial Plants of the Year were mentioned and/or pictured.

Panayoti Kelaidis, author, botanizer, educator and high priest of the high country at Denver Botanical Garden, heralded unfamiliar plants he feels should be better known and used. His favorites come from our canyonlands, and from Africa, the Mediterranean and the Himalayas.

Lee Buttala gave an unapologetically sexy lecture. The former Executive Director of Seed Savers Exchange, and preservation program manager for the Garden Conservancy, challenged us to see the beauty in plants after flowers

fade. He exhorted, "Be seedy, don't be a deadhead. Let things evolve. Promote polyamory and interbreeding."

High-end landscaper **James Alexander-Sinclair** shared stunning images of magical transformations he's crafted in urban and rural England, seamlessly marrying the whimsical with the pragmatic.

His finale: "The most important garden I ever made." Something about his tone hushed the crowd and rightly so: this garden graces a spinal injury center hemmed in by highways, a place for those who find their lives "changed forever, in an instant."

A patient's wife told him that when she and her husband simply needed "a good cry," there was nowhere to go but a broom closet.

The cure: a public place composed of private spaces, where families can have their quiet time, or sit in fellowship amid living beauty, not antiseptic smells and beeping monitors. Or brooms.

Afterwards I told James of a garden visit that moved me deeply, on a children's hospital rooftop. At random, I opened a guest book where visitors record their thoughts, and found (stop me if you've heard it) this: "I love this garden," a mother wrote. "I was sitting in this garden the night the helicopter landed with my daughter's new heart."

I could not read, nor can I recount or even type, those words dry-eyed. They get me every time.

May this holiday season find you surrounded by loved ones. Don't ever let anyone tell you we're a luxury. **GP**

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