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An Uphill Battle

John Friel



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Confession: I sometimes feel like a bit of a fraud. I love plants. I sell them, write about them, photograph them, even lecture on them ... but I'm not a very active gardener.

Perhaps I suffer from Impostor Syndrome, the mysterious sense of unworthiness that afflicts even very high achievers in the arts and business. Or perhaps I'm a real fake whose every train of thought needs a grain of salt.

Occasionally, I make up for lost time. This November and (gulp) early December, I tackled a slope behind my home, a steep patch of typical Lancaster County clay. We boast the world's most fertile dry farmland, but it's frustrating stuff to work with: clingy as tar when wet, brittle as brick when dry. And limestone, our bedrock, always lurks just below the surface. There's a quarry across my river.

When neglected, this too-steep-to-mow bank becomes a waist-high weedy eyesore. I've been guilty of that neglect the last two years, hence this fall's dramatic intervention. After lots of ripping out, hacking back and mulching, here's a partial list of what went into that slope.

Ajuga reptans

Apologies to native purists, but an assertive, butt-kicking groundcover was called for here. Hence, two varieties of bugleweed. If, after a few years, it's become a monoculture of this Asian import, so be it. Better ajuga than a jungle.

Callicarpa americana

When I first saw beautyberry at a cut flower conference, I thought someone had dyed the berries that improbable purple. But, no, that's their natural hue. Clustered on woody stems, they're striking on the bush or in a vase. The scientific and common names are synonyms in different languages: *Callicarpa* = beautiful seed.

Deutzia Nikko

A great little shrub and a marketing lesson. At a previous employer, I attempted with little success to graft woodies onto our perennial starter lineup. We did our homework and chose genera like *deutzia*, *itea* and *spirea*—compact woodies that work well in gallon perennial programs. To our chagrin, we found that we simply weren't front-of-mind for that product. There's woody, and there's herbaceous, and the twain meet but rarely in liner buyers' consciousness.

Amsonia Butterscotch (trademarked)

This one solves a problem I didn't know existed with *A. hubrichtii*, a Perennial Plant of the Year winner: Tip die-back. Consciousness raised, I started looking more closely. Sure enough, even in some world-class public gardens that shall remain anonymous, the tips of *A. hubrichtii* were distorted, wizened, browned out. This one has the same breeze-tossed froth of fine green summer foliage, but segues into a richer, deeper autumnal tone. I mixed it with grasses (*miscanthus* and *panicum*) near the top of the slope. Having seen it used to good effect as a grass companion, I'm optimistic that it'll look great—if it doesn't die because I stupidly waited 'til December to plant it.

Begonia grandis

The very idea of hardy begonia tickles me, probably because of the years I spent selling non-hardy types. Reiger, Rex, wax—all those tender, succulent-stemmed house and bedding plants left me unprepared. And, in fact, this one's kind of a crapshoot, even though it went in early in the process. Some swear it's hardy here in Zone 6b, while others say it's died each time they've tried it. A half-zone farther south, it's a sure thing, but here? Ask me in May.

When I stood and straightened, I was surprised by how much discomfort working at such an angle can cause. The uphill battle left my glutes feeling as if someone had literally kicked my butt.

I wonder if that happens to real gardeners. **GP**

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