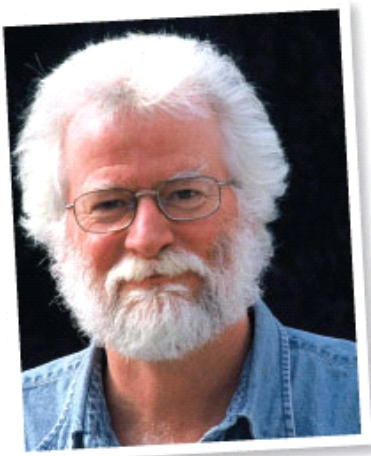


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Flower Show Forever

John Friel



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They've done it again. Another year, another Philadelphia Flower Show, another home run.

I've attended PFS with few absences for over a quarter of a century. It never disappoints. Some years are better than others, but the Wow! always eclipses the Meh! This year, I finally trained into Philly on the final Sunday, just hours before the closing bell.

It was my first Last Day, and amazingly, had I not known, I wouldn't have known. Of course, I DID know, so I hunted for signs: withered foliage, spent flowers, dried-up droopy anything? Just a few flagging cut Philodendron leaves and a tired rose or two. From towering olive tree to detail-rich villa to intricate dried-flower sculpture, nothing appeared shopworn.

I was as impressed by that as by any display. PFS has much in common with industry trade shows. Keeping live plants and flowers presentable in the hostile environment of a vast hall, with chilled dry air and inadequate light, is tough enough at Cultivate or MANTS, which last three days. PFS goes on for nine.

The world's oldest, largest indoor flower show is an intuitive choice for any professional plantsperson's bucket list. This year's theme, "Riviera Holiday," was evoked via pastel stucco and lavish slatherings of Mediterranean plants, especially rosemary, thyme and lavender.

Last year's theme, "Flower Power," was a bell-bottomed Memory Lane stroll through the '60s and '70s, with a Hendrix/Dead/Beatles soundtrack. I wrote, "A whiff of weed would have seemed perfectly apropos."

A year later? No whiff to sniff, but the real thing was in the house. A CBD products display, The Greenroom, traced "the cannabis journey from taboo to mainstream." We all knew legalization was inevitable, but actual weed, here? Never saw it coming. Oh blah dee, oh blah dah.

As I type, fear of the coronavirus roils events and lives. Boston's sacred Saint Patrick's Day parade is cancelled. Sporting events are slated for empty arenas. PFS attendance felt like business as usual. No head count yet, but city and state officials agree Pennsylvania tourism is, knock wood, strong.

Disease concerns faded when I entered the most provocative display. Titled simply "Displaced," it honored World Refugee Day (June 20), which each year recognizes those rendered homeless by forces too large to resist, in

numbers too large to fathom. Worldwide, 70 million have been forced from their homes. That's everyone in Florida and Pennsylvania, plus most of California, on the run—all desperate, most finding not shelter, but hostility. Each day, 37,000 more flee persecution or war.

Juxtaposed against that darkness, COVID-19's disruptions shrank to a mere blip on our collective national radar. May we rise to the occasion. Back to the show.

Always looking for grasses and grasslike plants, I was a tad disappointed; last year's show featured more. But I was encouraged by gangs of carex and a smattering of panicum. Cut plumes of cortaderia, AKA "pampas grass," proved irresistible to fondling fingers.

Succulents are still very hot; bromeliads are holding their own. Lots of natives were on hand, including a booth of American Beauties-branded perennials. Hort Couture was the only other blatantly branded display I spotted.

So if you haven't been, or haven't been lately, add PFS to your bucket list—an overused term that needs an upgrade. The green industries deserve something less generic. How about "windowbox list" or "wheelbarrow list?"

By any name, fill it. PFS belongs right up there with Kew, Longwood Gardens, IPM Essen, and the Japanese, Chinese and Rose Gardens of Portland, Oregon. If fortune finds you in range of any of the above, go. **GP**

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