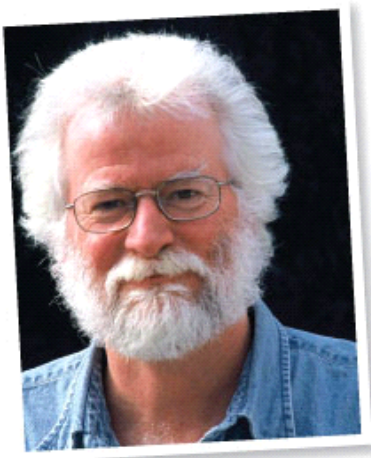


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Back From the Future

John Friel



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As I type, you're all living in the future: You know what happened at Cultivate'20 Virtual. To me, it's still an unknown and unknowable quantity on the near horizon, starting after this column's deadline. As you read this, it will have come and gone. *Que sera, sera*; whatever will be, will have been.

So I'm looking ahead at something we're both now looking back on. "Looking ahead at" isn't always synonymous with "looking forward to," but I'm dying to know how that annual mob scene translated to cyberspace. Last year's 700-plus live exhibitors dwindled to about 250 cyber booths, but what did that mean? Did the industry love it, loathe it, skip it? Was it a Wow! or a Meh or something in between?

So much is normal here in the COVID-19 twilight zone and so much is not. I'm still writing columns, newsletters and marketing emails. We still spent

months revamping our catalog: Out with the old, in with the new. Descriptions written, pricing updated, sales history pondered, nomenclatural niceties nailed down.

But the yearly big question—how many to print?—became more nuanced. A big chunk of our print run has always disappeared at trade shows, especially Cultivate. It goes without saying that's not happening this year. (Why is the phrase "goes without saying" always followed by what didn't need saying?)

This may be the tipping point year when nursery catalogs are consumed more on-screen than in-hand, when even Boomers like me concede that virtual is the new real. Our younger constituents may not notice: To Gen Yers, the boundary between RL and online is already barely a speed bump.

Cultivate Literal is but one of many things we've all missed. For many, professional sports are high on that list. Rooting for any team, in any sport, unites us. We haven't had that.

To some, sports are a non-issue. Why cheer for teams of millionaires from everywhere but your home town? It's a logical question, but logic isn't really a player in this arena. Maybe sports are just an update on ancient Rome's "bread and circuses" to pacify the masses, but we crave that box score.

I missed spring. Hunkered down, sheltering in place, I missed the enthusiasm, the optimism, the frenzy of customer pickups. And this was a spring like no other. What looked at first like a lost year ended very differently because you did a phenomenal job of making consumers, experienced gardeners and newbies alike, as safe and comfortable as

possible. And they responded. As Chris Beytes has amply documented, in state after state, week after week, sales broke records.

A garden center owner in the Midwest chided me in March for not urging people to shut down and stay home, like he did. In May, he acknowledged he'd opened after all and had a fantastic season.

Which underlines and italicizes something I've long believed and often said, in print and otherwise: We're neither a luxury, nor a branch of the entertainment industry. We make a difference in people's lives. Our products bring hope, reward optimism, bond generations. We feed a need that's no less real because it's difficult to quantify.

If you doubt the ability of sports to move us, consider this ironically timely anecdote: An interviewer once called Martin Luther King, Jr. "the founder of the Civil Rights movement." King corrected him: "The founder of the Civil Rights movement was Jackie Robinson."

If you doubt the essentiality of the green industries, ponder those record sales. We—you—matter in people's lives.

Fingers crossed: See you in Columbus next year. **GP**