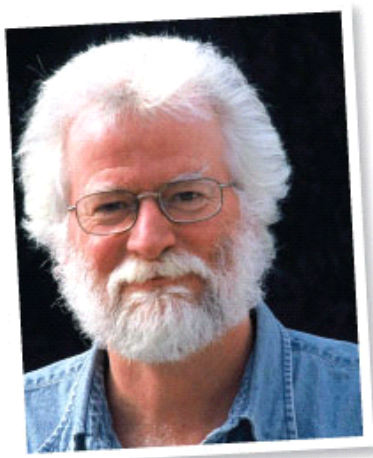


11/1/2020

## Zooming in on 2021

*John Friel*



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In the brave new world of virtual industry events, webinars and Zoom meetings are proving surprisingly good substitutes for real-life seminars. The Perennial Plant Association put on a great one in September: "Looking Forward to 2021."

Five speakers represented a broad green swath: public gardens, wholesale growers and retail IGCs, all sharing their remarkably similar COVID-19 pandemic responses.

**Art Vanden Enden, Vice President, Garden Centre Operations, Sheridan Nurseries, Canada. (Wholesale/retail, eight IGCs.):** Early 2020 looked like a washout. But once allowed to open, "Retail business recovery was miraculous. It's a record year for outdoor living." Sheridan suspended programs like kids' activities, public events, photo ops, even plant warranties.

They streamlined, trimmed hours to avoid employee burnout and diligently enforced safety protocols.

"Where's the bottleneck in your business?" Art asked. "You need to turn guests faster." That sounds cold, but getting customers out the door quickly, or keeping them in their cars, isn't just better for your bottom line. It's good customer service.

**Kristen Thoroman, Director of Education and Exhibitions, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, Richmond, Virginia:** Her theme: "Pause, Pivot, Reimagine." Ginter's garden shop converted to online selling and contactless pickup. Musical events were spread to multiple locations, avoiding crowding. Big weddings: Out. Mini-weddings and elopements: In. "Catered elopement" would normally be oxymoronic, but "normal" has been redefined.

Unlike retailers, public gardens cannot recoup lost revenue. To compensate, Ginter's gardeners are leaving perennials in the ground for next year, buying fewer plants in. Kristen summed up, "A smaller budget just means more creativity."

**Heather Wheatley, Educational Coordinator, Homestead Gardens, Maryland (Retail IGC/wholesale landscape contractor supplier. Since they service farmers, they stayed open with limits.):** Her theme: "The Retail Rebuild."

Their new 30-acre "agrotourism" campus with brewery, restaurant and wedding venue was heavily impacted. Their

website became hugely important: “E-commerce is something we’re going to have forever. Our whole goal is to grow gardeners.”

**James Gagliardi, Supervisory Horticulturist, Smithsonian Institution:** The “nation’s attic” has 13 gardens. Gardening around the National Mall always has challenges, but most stem from too many people, not too few. “It was a beautiful spring in D.C.,” James said, but nobody came to see it. Downtown crowds dwindled by 90%. The gardens closed just before their biggest visitation time.

Government funding conveys no immunity to funding cuts, layoffs and ensuing maintenance problems. The gardens finally reopened in mid-August, with closed bathrooms, bare soil and signage stressing hygiene, distancing and face-covering.

**Taylor Pilker, co-owner, Cavano’s Perennials, Maryland (Wholesale):** Taylor closed the proceedings stirring, recapping challenges met and lessons learned. Each generation learns this one: hard times can be good times. Said Taylor, “When we face challenges, we grow gardens.” Speaking not just of our industry, but of humankind, he said, “We’re a resilient species. We not only survive, we thrive in tough circumstances.”

### Takeaways

- We’ve gained 16 million new customers. Help them! Don’t insult, don’t assume. I’ve told gardening groups, “Never feed a dry root” almost apologetically, but they wrote it down.
- Don’t plan for 2021 assuming COVID-19 is suddenly “solved.”
- After-hours activities have gone prime time. Let guests see you sanitizing carts and surfaces. Wear the mask. Walk the talk.
- Think protocol slippage won’t hurt business? Wrong. When my local beer distributor scoffed at masks after a month, I changed vendors.
- Adapt. As Art said, “The historical guide on what we can accomplish has been thrown out the window.” **GP**

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