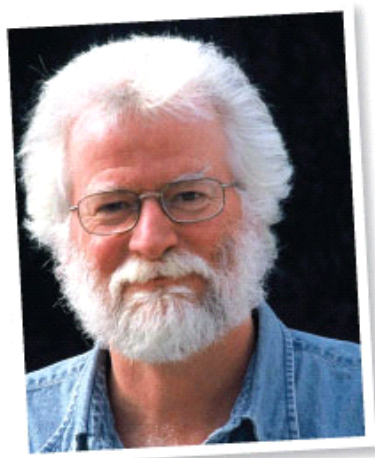


3/1/2021

## Chainsaw Masker

*John Friel*



*John Friel*

There's lots of talk about retaining our precious new silver-lining gardeners. It's a theme of this issue.

That's because lots of people spent lots of quality quarantine time sprucing up their homes, indoors and out. Plant sales soared. Everything that goes with plants got a boost: Tools, planters, trellises, fertilizers, repellents, books, yada yada. And many buyers were first-time gardeners. Yay!

New blood is great, but what about bringing OLD gardeners back? It's a universal business maxim that it's cheaper to retain existing customers than to attract new ones. Let's not get so giddy about newbies that we lose track of customers who built our base.

Many of us have been able to work remotely through this pandemic mess. Not everyone was so fortunate. Millions of jobs vanished. The people who

once held those jobs—your customers—suddenly had time, but not money.

You may not have noticed their absence. You were snowed under by newcomers, trying to keep up and keep everybody safe. But I'd wager that some folks who faithfully rang your registers spring after spring simply couldn't afford you in 2020. Others were afraid to venture through your doors. Friends have told me they drove to their favorite GC, but never got out of the car. Your full parking lot made them nervous.

I hate to cast a pall over the proceedings, but I'd also wager that some—hopefully few—of your former regulars won't ring anyone's register this year. A moment of silence, please. Amen.

We have a double challenge: Convince first-timers that their gardening high wasn't just a one-off. That lightning can strike again and again. And remind those who took a hiatus due to an abundance of caution or an absence of cash: Hey, we're still here. Gardening still satisfies the soul like it did pre-COVID. Come back to the pack.

Meanwhile, much of what was wrong with 2020 is still daily reality. People are out of work. Businesses are shuttered, many permanently. Industry events that didn't happen are still on the bubble in 2021, facing cancelation or going virtual.

AmericanHort plans to fire up Cultivate'21 in July. Fingers crossed. But a perennial conference I help plan in Pennsylvania has reluctantly gone virtual because no one knows what will be safe, legal or wise even by October.

As I type, my arm is still tender from my first COVID vaccination. It will be sore again when my next column is under construction. Meanwhile, I'm still donning the mask, still disinfecting, still scrubbing until I'm no longer sure I have fingerprints.

Yes, there are vaccines that seem effective. I'm halfway to whatever level of immunity they bestow. I hate needles, but this one was a huge shot in the arm for confidence. Still, it hasn't changed anything. Not yet.

This will seem like a digression. It's not. I heat my home with wood, as regular readers know. Last year my son bought me a pair of chainsaw chaps, designed to protect me from carelessness or mechanical malfunction.

I hate wearing them. They're worse than a mask. They're hot, bulky and uncomfortable. But I wear them. Because how stupid would I feel writhing on the ground in the woods, bleeding out from a severed femoral artery, knowing a few pounds of Kevlar could have kept me alive? Answer: Really, really stupid. And rightly so.

How galling would it be to contract a potentially deadly virus NOW, when the light at the tunnel's end is brightening daily—and a few ounces of cloth or paper could have kept you healthy? **GP**

---

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