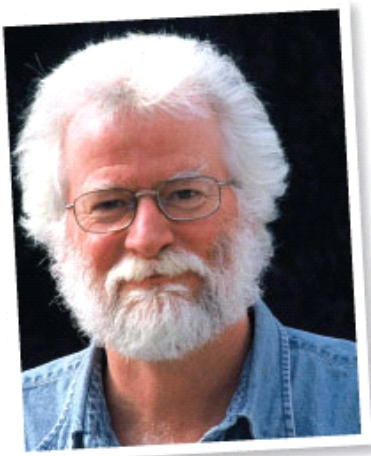


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Christmas in August

John Friel



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Buying hardgoods, from trowels to tchotchkes, has much in common with growing plants. Buyer and grower alike must think ahead and count backwards, from target on-hand date to order, sow, stick and pinch dates. It's fuzzy math in the best of circumstances, but global supply chain chaos has rendered both gigs more angst-ridden. Kudos to those ingenious souls who pull it off and make your GC displays rock anyway.

Naturally, there are major differences. This year's unsold tree ornaments and lawn decorations can go into storage and back on sale for Xmas '22. Unsold poinsettias, etc.? If even last-minute discounts don't get them to the register, they're Dumpster-bound.

I say "etc." because the inevitable poinsettia isn't the only living decor to offer your customers. Painted or au naturel, it's a given; you can't pretend to be

ready for Christmas sales without it. But it wasn't always so.

In my trucking days, I delivered thousands of poinsettia baskets to retailers up and down the Bos-Wash corridor, often in nasty weather. Heroic measures were sometimes necessary to get them from truck to store; I remember persuading a stony-faced Baltimore cop to let me back onto an empty pedestrian plaza one particularly ugly, icy day.

I learned that the only thing prettier than a greenhouse full of well-grown poinsettias is the same greenhouse, just emptied. It amazes me still that this fragile tropical species ever became THE Christmas plant. Modern breeding has done wonders, but it still resents cold air, imperfect irrigation and especially ethylene. It's a demanding, counterintuitive midwinter staple.

But it has The Look that enlivens monochrome winter. It shouts "Christmas!" even when painted day-glo, glitter-encrusted fuchsia. Attempts to market it in other seasons have fallen as flat as, say, a July Super Bowl.

It only seems like the namesake of Joel Poinsett, Minister to Mexico, has been around forever. It made its public debut as a novelty, "a new Euphorbia with bright-colored bracteas or floral leaves," at the 1829 Philadelphia Flower Show. Its current status took a century to develop.

Meanwhile, people had other seasonal fauna, like Christmas cactus, an epiphyte from the rainforests of Brazil. Florists forced pips of Convallaria, lily-of-the-valley, into flower. The red-fruited, green-leaved Jerusalem cherry was an old-time favorite. I once had to persuade a garden center employee to spit out the fruit he'd stuffed into his mouth,

showing off for a female co-worker, because unlike the oft-maligned poinsettia, *Solanum pseudocapsicum* really is mildly poisonous.

Maybe it's time to think outside the bract again. One candidate: the soft, pristine silver leaves of *Senecio Angel Wings*. But its real role in this context is as a beautiful poinsettia foil.

For stand-alone holiday interest, there's a lot to be said for another tropical genus, begonia. Of particular interest: The not-coincidentally-named, ultra-colorful Holiday series from Terra Nova Nurseries. Full disclosure: My employer grows the senecio and we're testing the begonia waters, too. Stay tuned.

Will anything ever replace poinsettias? Will they someday be the answer to a trivia question, a marginalized memory like forced *Convallaria* or Jerusalem cherries? Not in my lifetime or (probably) yours. But if garish painted poinsettias can become a tradition, anything's possible.

Columnists also plan ahead and count back. As I type, I'm looking forward to looking back on Cultivate'21, the first 3-D, f2f edition in two years. The many unknowns—who will have attended/exhibited, who passed, was it really safe?—are likely thoroughly dissected elsewhere in this very magazine.

But I have no doubt that the descendants of Minister Poinsett's jungle discovery will be well-represented in Columbus. 'Tis the season. **GP**

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