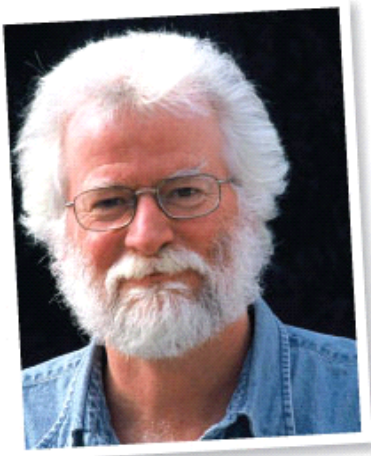


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## Year of the Hybrid

*John Friel*



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Hybrids aren't just for plants and cars anymore. You can still nibble a pluot while driving your Prius, but now you can buy hybrid car wax, hybrid bicycles, hybrid banking/investment/insurance plans and so on. There's even hybrid meat—lab-produced chicken mixed with vegetable protein. Scary.

A more palatable sort of hybrid is being cooked up by the Perennial Plant Association. For over 30 years, PPA has held yearly (in this context, let's eschew the synonym that starts with A) symposia in cities around the U.S. and Canada. For reasons no one should need explained, this year, PPA went hybrid. And it's largely working pretty darned well.

A hybrid obviously needs at least two components. PPA has crossed in-person, mostly-outdoor "pop-up" events with virtual education. A three-day roster of Zoom lectures hit all the right notes: eye-popping gardens, excellent

presenters and the beloved New Plants Forum, renamed New To The Market to include products not in the vegetable kingdom. A smart move.

Was it as good as the real thing? Of course not. Was it better than no Symposium at all? Emphatically, yes.

The ambitious pop-up schedule is nationwide. The first event, hosted by Cavano's Perennials in Maryland, is recent history as I type. Pop-ups in Oregon, Illinois and Michigan will be likewise as you read. Still to come in September: Lancaster, Pennsylvania (including a tour of my employer's trial garden); Rougemont, North Carolina and West Tisbury, Massachusetts. Whew!

If a pop-up event is within your range, pop in. You won't regret it. For details: [perennialplant.org](https://perennialplant.org).

Another recent event, usually a hybrid, segued to a more monocultural format. The Penn State Flower Trials have been going on for 88 years. Since 1992, they've been in Landisville, Pennsylvania, at the Southeast Agricultural Research and Extension Center.

For years, the Trials included tours, educational sessions, refreshments and lunch. For 2021, they were restructured, spread over multiple days, with timed entry, guided tours and nothing indoors.

Unfortunate, but under the direction of ex-colleague Sinclair Adam, the core draw, the trial gardens themselves, have never looked better. There are literally thousands of acquisitions in the ground and in containers, in sun and shade,

from breeders large and small, in annuals, vegetables, herbs, perennials and ornamental grasses.

Thanks to the dedication of a small crew and a small army of volunteers, that ambitious spread is a treat. It was gratifying to see many varieties we grow looking good, better and downright great. Let's hear it for Ag Extension!

Another very different trial, Star Roses & Plants in West Grove, Pennsylvania, also had to pull in its horns. No indoor tours, no refreshments. Is that really an open house? More like an ajar house. But there was a nice swag bag and row upon row of cool new plants to ogle.

Almost enough has been written about Cultivate, which this year went back, with considerable apprehension, to its all-inclusive, all-indoor self, trade show and lectures alike. It felt wonderful, if unnerving, to be among colleagues and customers again. The overall aura was one big ecstatic Yes!, albeit slightly clouded by concerns about shortages of certain hard goods.

While in Columbus, I attended the Horticultural Industries Leadership Award ceremony to applaud friends and honorees Ferenc Kiss of Cavano's and Lloyd Traven of Peace Tree Farm.

Shortly after I got home, my night-blooming cactus, a.k.a. *Epiphyllum oxypetalum*, opened six flowers. You could sort of argue that it's a cross: the world's homeliest foliage x world's loveliest bloom. The connection? Lloyd gave me the cuttings about 10 years ago. Like our industry, it's still going strong, still making the world beautiful. **GP**

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