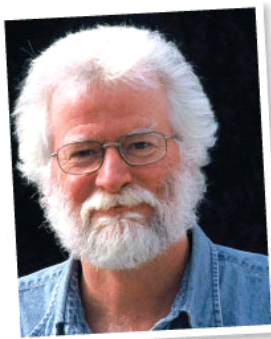


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Southbound

John Friel



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Like many of you, I'm traveling again, cautiously. Most recent sojourns have been well south of my Pennsylvania home. I drove to both Carolinas and a week later flew to corporate headquarters in Florida. And then came MANTS, the MidAtlantic Nursery Trade Show, in Baltimore.

It's been a while since I got very far below the Mason-Dixon Line and I'd never seen the South at Christmas. Some things were familiar, some totally new. No offense, Dixie, but to a Northerner, Christmas lights on palm trees are kinda cool, but still deeply weird.

No one in the green industry can escape horticulture while traveling. Why would you even try? If you're near Wilmington, North Carolina, you must visit Airlie Gardens, former home of fabulously wealthy Pembroke and Sarah Jones, whose lavish lifestyle allegedly inspired the saying, "Keeping up with the Joneses." This 67-acre gem hosts 120,000 visitors a year. The Christmas light show was sold out. One live oak tree is believed to be nearly 500 years old. Luckily, it was not among the hundreds felled by Hurricane Florence in 2018.

I always try to visit at least one garden center. True Blue Nursery, a large Myrtle Beach retailer, offered a new (to me) decoration: Crab pot Christmas trees. They're made of weatherproof plastic-coated mesh, like real crab traps, and strung with lights, of course. Why? Well, why not? It's a coastal thing, Yankee.

True Blue had a great selection of pottery, fountains for every budget and a whole building dedicated to birding supplies. And no worries—the alligator in the irrigation pond was just a 4-footer. We don't get those in PA. Northern retailers also don't advertise poinsettias, sod and grass seed simultaneously, but apparently in South Carolina, December is when you regroove your lawn.

Speaking of birds: Both Carolinas are loaded. I watched white pelicans hunting in packs, grebes and mergansers diving for fish, and bald eagles carrying nest-building material. My life list grew by one when a wood stork passed low over the saltmarsh at Huntington Beach.

An overdue visit to my employer's headquarters was an eye-opener. They've been rebuilding, reorganizing and reinventing the company since my last tour. I can't describe it without sounding like an infomercial, so let's talk weather.

While folks back home were shivering through 20-degree nights, I was kayaking on the Perdido River in shorts and

sandals. I love Pennsylvania, but there's something to be said for Florida in winter.

MANTS was, um, interesting. Floor traffic was down over 50% from 2020—but up 100% from 2021. Many booths were empty. Day 1 was slow, Day 2 pretty good, Day 3 ... Hello? Anybody here? To be fair, Day 3 is slow at every show; it's when exhibitors get to visit one another.

The show was the victim of a perfect storm of impediments, including a storm—literally. The first set-up day coincided with an epic blizzard-fueled gridlock on I-95 not far south, stranding drivers for 24 hours. Some MANTS-bound folks were certainly stuck in that mess.

There were flight cancellations galore, travel restrictions and, of course, the C-word. Which isn't three causes, it's one cause and two side-effects. One of our sales people was stranded in Florida.

Despite all that, it was actually an OK show—just not up to MANTS' typical excellent standards. The prevailing mood among booth denizens was pretty good, considering. We'll be back!

My recent air travel, sadly, confirmed that the formerly friendly skies are less fun than ever. The airlines, the TSA and the state of the world have sucked all the pleasure out of every part of flying but one: You can still gaze down upon the world from a vantage point available no other way. Remember when planes were half full and you could spread out onto a vacant seat? That's history. They're all packed. Want a beer? Sorry, first-class passengers only. On the plus side, there's a good chance your flight will be canceled!

As the world slowly, by fits and starts, resumes its routines, perhaps we'll cross paths on the trade show trail, maybe even on a plane. You'll find me in a window seat. **GP**

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