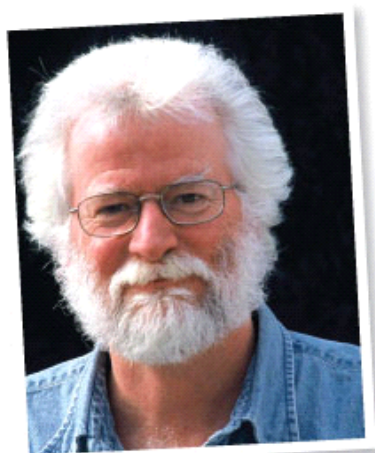


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Bringing Home the Bacon

John Friel



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Remember that old game Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon? The premise is that anyone in Hollywood can be connected to the game's eponym by no more than six other actors.

Anyone who actually appeared in a movie with Kevin has a Bacon Number of 1; only Kevin himself, naturally, has zero degrees. Someone who appeared in a movie with someone else who once costarred with Kevin? That's two degrees. And so on.

The game can be traced in very few steps to Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy, whose 1929 short story "Chain Links" postulated that any two individuals could be coupled via at most five acquaintances, since modern transportation and communications were rendering geography irrelevant, making the world smaller by shrinking "social distance"—an early, and very

different, use of that phrase. But I digress.

If the movie industry were centered in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where I live, the game would be Four Degrees of Amos Stoltzfus. Maybe three. I've lived here a mere 50 years, which makes me still something of an outsider. It took probably 10 years to get used to the idea that here, everyone you know knows, and/or is related to, anywhere from one to 10 other people you know. Small county, ain't?

Horticulture has more in common with Lancaster than with Hollywood. The green industries are a surprisingly intimate community. If you stick around long enough, unexpected connections keep cropping up.

For example, I'm not a subscriber to Fine Gardening Magazine, unless someone gifted me and didn't tell me, but the latest edition recently, mysteriously, appeared in my mailbox. A pleasant surprise. Scanning the index, I found I knew all but one author. In a couple of cases, we'd spoken at the same conference.

Another example: trade shows. On the rare occasions that you get to leave your booth, you almost can't make your way down any aisle without bumping into someone, either manning their own booth or walking the floor, that you never thought you'd see in, say, Baltimore or Denver. Can't say that about Columbus; at Cultivate, you expect to see everybody. A simple stroll to stretch your legs or grab another coffee can take half an hour.

I've been to Europe only a few times. In 1996, I landed at Heathrow, badly jet-lagged, groggily trying to find my rental car as announcements blared in a thousand languages. I knew two people in England and suddenly one of them

said, quite close, “John?” It was Adrian Bloom, hustling to catch a plane en route to South Africa.

Last October, I was invited to speak at a public garden I'd never heard of. Boerner Botanical Gardens near Milwaukee, proved to be a lovely place. Born in the Great Depression/Public Works era, it boasts an education center with meeting and event spaces, an impressive horticultural library and gift shop, plus extensive perennial and trial gardens I wish I'd seen about six weeks earlier. Frost comes early in Wisconsin.

I met just one prior acquaintance there, retired Gloeckner rep John Esser, but then a familiar, if disembodied, name appeared: Boerner's former Garden Director, rosarian extraordinaire William Radler.

You might not recognize that name unless you live near Greenfield, Wisconsin, where he's known for his open-to-the-public research and display gardens, and for his wide-reaching philanthropy. But the most famous result of his breeding work is a household word everywhere. How many Knock Out Roses have passed through your checkout line?

Hundreds of millions of Radrazz and its successors have been sold worldwide, and they all trace their roots to Wisconsin. I sold, photographed, described and touted them for years. “Rose” was a four-letter word to the average gardener, a fanatic's fussy toy, until Radler transformed the category by creating roses for the rest of us. And there I was, by blind luck, in their birthplace.

Small industry, ain't? Stick around. Get around. Eventually, you'll know everybody. **GP**

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