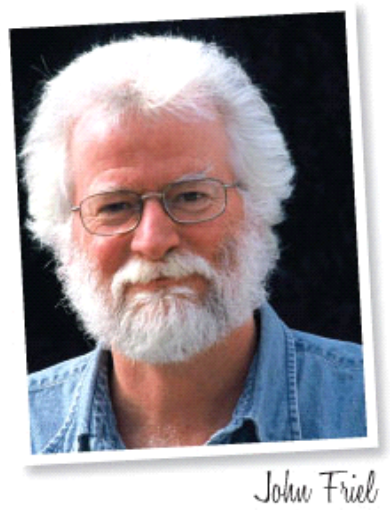
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Everything Old Is New Again … Eventually

John Friel



Forty and 50 years ago, everybody I knew had windowsills crammed with potted tropicals. It's heartening to know that houseplants are returning to something like the ubiquitous presence they were then.

In those days, most people my age didn't have much money. We swapped plants, traded cuttings and advice, helped one another figure out what would thrive vs. merely survive.

Pots were things you made, scrounged or reluctantly purchased. Visiting a friend's apartment, I was struck by a mass of silver-splashed leaves tumbling from a battered aluminum saucepan. Never having seen Pilea cadieri before, I asked what it was called.

"Aluminum plant," he replied. Oh, wise guy, eh? Assuming he'd made up a joke name to match the impromptu container, I said "No, really, what is it?" He repeated, deadpan, "Aluminum plant."

Oh. OK, you weren't kidding.

Tropicals were my daily life when I first broke into hort. Then hardier stuff took over and has dominated my attention since. But you can't read any industry publication now and not be aware that houseplants are baaa-aack. And this month's theme got me wondering what I'd missed.

I knew a few things: that there's been an explosion of available succulents, tender and hardy, and that breeders have wrought a remarkable transformation in the orchid family, turning them from pricey, fragile fanatic's fodder to affordable, mainstream decor. Also, big plants, like monstera, are hot. Not a lot more.

So I did a little homework. At first it seemed I hadn't missed very much at all.

Two venerable shelter magazines offered lists of "hard-to-kill houseplants" and "trendy indoor plants for 2022." Nearly everything listed was indistinguishable from something I'd delivered to retailers in the late 1970s and early '80s: Spider plants, peace lily, aloe vera, philodendron, crassula, pilea, peperomia, bromeliads, even (shudder) English ivy, which is rightfully banned in some states.

Been there, sold that. Mea culpa.

If not for the fact that this list was online, an obvious impossibility in 1982, I might have believed it was, well, 1982. It was, like, déjà vu all over again, baby.

But! Just a bit more digging revealed that help is at hand. As in the perennial world I now call home, happily, breeders are working on new varieties. The genera haven't changed much, but there are nifty alternatives in series like Dümmen's Welcome to the Jungle program, launched in 2020.

Even there, some plants, like fittonia and watermelon peperomia, are indistinguishable from the 4-in. pots I delivered 40 years ago. There are over a dozen varieties of peperomia, a diverse genus that's been a houseplant since at least the 1930s. Some are familiar, some utterly novel and really striking. And they've got snazzy marketable names like Leapfrog, Jitterbug and Raydiance.

Serendipitously, if that's the right word, the National Garden Bureau has declared 2022 the Year of the Peperomia. Their poster child: The aforementioned watermelon pep, P. argyreia. I couldn't begin to count how many of those I handled.

Despite the eye-rolls of old-timers, much has changed. The industry and the market seem better attuned to one another this cycle. The pandemic proved that people are happy to spend good money to surround themselves with beautiful living things, eager to bathe their living spaces in chlorophyll's calming, cheering presence.

And this upstart "Internet" thing, where you're probably reading this, makes it easy to bring the goods to your doorstep without having to make the acquaintance of a green-thumbed, generous friend.

If you'll permit me one more stroll down Memory Lane: Back in my youth, the craftiest of us accessorized with macramé basket hangers. They're back, too. **GP**

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