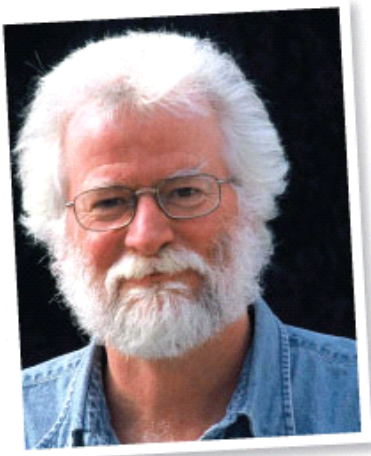


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What's New? Who Cares?

John Friel



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Every New Varieties issue inspires mixed emotions and contradictory thoughts, especially when it coincides with writing a perennial catalog. Tracking down descriptions, images and zone ratings for dozens of introductions can be quite the scavenger hunt.

A sneak peek at the future, at the fresh looks we're bringing to our customers and theirs, is fun and exciting. Then come the nagging doubts: Will these newcomers inspire homeowners? Could even the prettiest variety ever grown pack enough charisma to create new gardeners from scratch?

The most nagging doubt is this: Do gardeners care that it's new? My gut said, No. Most really don't. But I wanted evidence.

I visited a favorite local venue, Ken's Gardens, a second-generation, two-location IGC celebrating its 50th year in business. They were preparing for a

week-long semi-centennial bash featuring themed days, plant talks, food trucks, discounts, workshops and more, checking all the boxes.

My premise was that the constant New! New! New! drumbeat is really only audible to green industry denizens, an insider conversation only peripherally involving our end consumer. New varieties are our obsession, not a gardener's grail.

I asked Ken's employee Christy Twigg a loaded question: Do people come in asking, "What's new? What haven't I seen before?" Well, no. Not really. Those questions bombard us at every trade show, but New! is not front-of-mind at retail.

However, she said, "We do have consistent repeat customers who come every year, early in the season. They're always looking to improve their gardens." That demographic is more open to unfamiliar material. But they're greatly outnumbered by recent converts looking for, say, rudbeckia, who are promptly overwhelmed by all the available options. And that's just one genus at one midsize GC.

Owner Kerry Lapp confirmed another suspicion: Most gardeners don't know about the Perennial Plant Association's Perennial Plant of the Year promotion. It pains me to admit that. They're also not aware that the National Garden Bureau has declared this the Year of the Phlox.

Cutting-edge genetics are not on gardeners' radar. They're looking for beauty, for alternatives to last year's

disappointments, for solutions for problem areas—too wet, too dry, too hot, too dark—where nothing thrives. If they ARE looking for a specific plant, Christy and Kerry agreed, they saw it in a magazine. Luckily, shelter and garden publications—print, anyway—have gotten much better at not prematurely pushing unavailable things.

So, yes, I launched this experiment expecting a certain result, took a shallow sample, and—Voilà!—found evidence supporting my premise. Bad science? Yes. Expecting good science from an English major is never a good bet.

What does it mean? Do we stop seeking our Grail? Save ourselves a lot of trouble, grow the same old stuff year after year? Even Dr. Allan Armitage, plant pundit extraordinaire who often called new varieties “the lifeblood of our industry,” has advocated for slowing the pace of new introductions. So, for a while, did Dr. Michael Dirr.

So should we? Heck, no. Sorry, Docs, that rheostat is cranked up to 11. New varieties come down the conveyor faster than ever and they’re getting better.

Ken’s had many newer items: Polemonium Golden Feathers, a beautiful variegated Jacob’s ladder; Chick Charms Sempervivum; lots of PW pots, including the cleverly named Geranium Boom Chocolatta; and an impressive ornamental grass assortment. To my delight, there were several unfamiliar annuals among stalwarts like cleome and Angel Wing Begonia. And if gardeners read the signage, they’ll learn that hardy Geraniums Rozanne and Biokovo, side by side on the bench, both won that Perennial Plant of the Year thingy.

What gardeners want matters a lot—and at the same time, it means very little. As Steve Jobs said, people don’t know they want something until someone shows it to them. Gardeners rely on us to show it to them and we need to show it. It’s what keeps us going, keeps our juices flowing.

Most gardeners will never feel our need for New!, but it benefits them anyway. Whether they know it or appreciate it or—more likely—not, it ensures that their future gardens will get a little better every year. Eleven is a good number.

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John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.