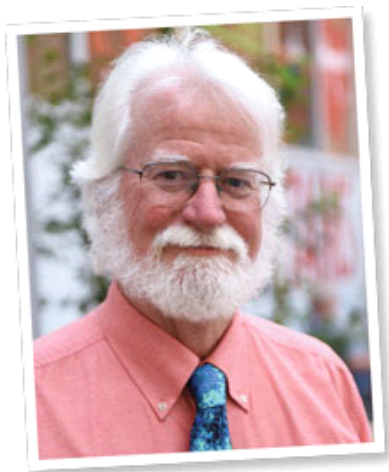


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Both Sides Now

John Friel



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This retirement thing has its points. One small example: I finally know what it's like to walk, not work, a trade show. It was pretty cool to be able to do that at MANTS last month.

I'm aware that many people merely tolerate trade shows. That was apparent from the question, asked in various ways: "I thought you retired! What the (expletive deleted) are you doing here?"

Answer: I like it there. It was great to just stroll at will, greeting old friends—not tethered to a booth, taking turns with colleagues for brief recon runs to faraway aisles. Or lunch.

As This Space has mentioned before, MANTS is an upbeat show. The default mood on the floor is usually optimistic—cautiously so in uncertain economic times, but otherwise, always a good vibe. 2023 was no exception.

Timing probably begets that mindset. In early January, most green industry elements are still in a holding pattern. Propagators are ramping up shipping, but their customers are watching money go out, counting the days until the tide turns and the cashflow reverses. But for most growers in the Northeast, nothing has gone seriously wrong yet. So far, so good; just eight more weeks of keeping winter at bay, and then gardeners and landscapers start flipping plastic. Barring some extreme weather event or infrastructure meltdown, we'll be okay.

MANTS's recent history is a microcosm of the pandemic era. The 2020 version just squeaked in under the wire before everything shut down and the Baltimore Convention Center became an overflow hospital. 2021 saw a valiant effort to recreate the show virtually, about which the less said, the better. In 2022, it was back, a bit nervously, with many empty booths and greatly diminished attendance, but back, live and in color. A year ago, I reported that floor traffic was "down over 50% from 2020, but up 100% from 2021."

The 2023 version was busy on the one day I walked it, nearly back up to pre-pandemic levels. It felt sort of like a homecoming.

Mindful that this is the New Products issue, I scouted out the floor for eye-catching novelties and was a bit disappointed. Unlike summer shows, it's not easy to present eye-popping pots in January. There appeared to be more gimmicky stuff—funky yard art, animatronic Santas and such—than there used to be and I can't call that a good thing.

What struck me instead is how things have changed over the years I've worked these gigs, like whole categories that didn't exist not so very long ago.

The MANTS buyer's guide lists 20 software suppliers, for everything from environmental controls to inventory tracking to payroll to POS. Five other vendors were eager to create and/or manage your website, a need that definitely didn't exist in my early days.

But that's how everybody rolls now. Here in Pennsylvania Dutch Country, even Amish vendors—growers, quilters, butchers, builders—have an online presence. Online is where the eyeballs are, and if you're not there, you kinda don't exist.

Still-maturing product lines like green roofs, living walls and mycorrhizal products were also represented, as were biological pest control suppliers and consultants. This is a relatively small, but infinitely faceted, industry.

One new product did stick out and not in a good way: A spotted lanternfly trap, described as an adhesive sheet, sticky on both sides, with no mechanism (e.g., screening) to prevent bycatch of desirable insects or birds.

Pennsylvania has the dubious honor of being Ground Zero for SLF's debut in the U.S. Sorry about that, but it wasn't our idea. If SLF have reached you, please find safer ways to reduce their numbers. Your Ag Extension agent can help.

If you're one of the folks who swung by my erstwhile employer's booth and didn't find me there, I hope our paths crossed eventually. If not, maybe next year. Baltimore is an easy daytrip, under two hours. The next big show, Cultivate, requires seven hours behind the wheel.

Do I like trade shows that much? Good question. Luckily, no answer is needed for several months. Somewhere on the Ohio Turnpike, I might be asking myself that same (expletive deleted) question. **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.