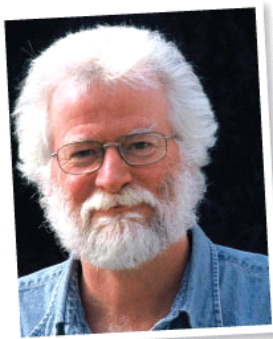


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Big H, Small g

John Friel



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If one were to attend the recent Pennsylvania Home & Garden Show in Harrisburg expecting something like the Philadelphia Flower Show, one would be (deservedly) disappointed. Walking in with no such preconceived notion, I wasn't ... much.

I'm a plants guy, so the H&G show was a letdown in just one way: lots of Home, precious little Garden. Still, though greatly outnumbered by hardscape, the living plant side held its own.

The Home category offered multiple residential options: builders, remodelers, installers of decks, patios, sunrooms, outdoor lighting, solar panels, roofing, siding, windows, kitchens, bathrooms, hot tubs. Surprise presence: steel shipping containers painted, wired and repurposed as backyard retreats, contractors' offices,

garden sheds and such. Apparently our trade imbalance has those large rectangular objects piling up like so many No Deposit, No Return soda cans.

The Garden side of the equation included a smattering of tree service pros, a water feature specialist and just two (2) actual plant vendors. First up was a newcomer: Bloombox. Tagline: "Your Garden Delivered." You order plants online. Bloombox sources them from local nurseries (like old friends Quality Greenhouses and Centerton Nursery) and brings them in their own trucks to your door.

"It's like grocery delivery," said founder Dave Zablocki, who worked at Babikow Greenhouses in Baltimore as a teen. He started Bloombox in his Maryland backyard six years ago. The firm grew nicely and added a PA location. Then came 2020.

COVID-19 was a watershed event for everyone, a Boom or Doom scenario for many. But bad as the pandemic was, it would have been far worse had we not been able to do so much remotely. Buying, selling, learning, seeking medical advice and, of course ... shopping! For everything!

Bloombox found itself perfectly positioned to capitalize on 16 million new stuck-at-home gardeners. Business grew at an exhilarating—no, make that terrifying—720% in 2020. Not a typo: Seven hundred twenty percent.

What happens when you go from keeping three employees busy to having so many orders that you need over 50? Dave called it "a blessing and a curse." Qualifications for new hires? "A pulse and a driver's license."

Many green industry entities are still having to settle for just one of those two. A former colleague described the struggle to add general greenhouse help this way: "If you can fog a mirror, we'll hire you."

You've probably heard (or lived) the horrors-of-hiring stories. Ads that drew no applicants, applicants who applied just so they could say they were looking for work, hirees who signed on and then disappeared, sometimes with notice, sometimes without, after a brief stint—anywhere from half a day to just long enough to collect that generous sign-on bonus.

What's next for Bloombox? Dave is looking at franchising, possibly partnering with brick-and-mortar garden centers that "struggle with the online thing."

The show's other plant source, Ashcombe Farm and Greenhouse, has been around 10 times as long. Founded in 1962, it's a full-service garden center with an in-house bakery, family-oriented events and their own unique way to bring flowers to the people.

A few years back they bought a retired school bus, gutted it, painted it green, named it "Fern" and refitted it as a mobile plant shop. Fern visits nursing homes, schools and, happily, the Home and Garden Show. They were doing a brisk business during my visit; twice I had to stop chatting with co-owner Jim Damschroder so he could ring up a customer buying from an impressive selection of houseplants, herbs, succulents and supplies inside and beside Fern.

I cruised the aisles seeking evidence of what I've often preached: that the Pantone Color of the Year has important retail presence, one the green industries should factor in. The 2023 pick, Viva Magenta, was there, in containers, cushions, clothing and accessories, but hardly a can't-miss-it presence.

The show handout cited "magnificent magenta" along with reds, roses, "cozy browns" and "warm neutrals" as hues to choose this year. I'm sure they'd all enhance your shipping container/shed. Check your local zoning. **GP**

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