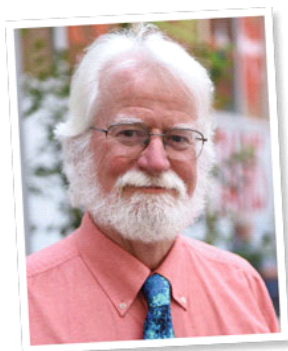


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Sproing!

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Spring's signatures are scrawled upon the land. Phlox subulata carpets slopes. Daffodils erupt en masse, challenging the very sun with their cheerful brilliance. Mallards and geese must be dissuaded from nesting in my yard, PW advertises on NPR and brilliant color fills retail shelves everywhere, from garden center to supermarket to the original pop-up store, those tents full of Easter and Mother's Day flowers that magically appear on vacant lots.

Annie Dillard wrote, "Spring is seeping northward, toward me and away from me, at 16 miles a day." Would that it were so linear a process, but spring actually comes not as steady seepage, but in spurts, feinting like a fencer, two steps forward, one step back. Here in the Mid-Atlantic, early April brought consecutive days hovering

around 80, followed just 48 hours later by consecutive freezing nights.

April Fool's isn't just a day, it's half the month, faking out optimistic gardeners and plants alike: Warm afternoons persuade trees, shrubs and perennials to blow their winter energy hoard on rampant growth. Can plants feel buyer's remorse? You have to wonder when you see a sad cascade of frost-blasted buds under a cherry tree.

As I've done in previous springs, I toured two independent garden centers and one big box to see how they were gearing up. And, once again, I failed two out of three times to escape without buying something. 'Tis the season.

Frey's Greenhouses

This small IGC launched in 2014 as an extension of a well-established greenhouse and farm in the next county north. The benches were already well-stocked with the expected forced bulbs, annuals and houseplants. Hanging baskets are a specialty, including those nifty large-tapered ones made of woven wicker, filled with mixed annuals. Still gaining size when I saw them, they'll be dripping rivulets of color like oversized Neapolitan ice cream cones by the time you read this.

Looking for perennials, naturally, I was impressed by Frey's selection, including not just the predictable, like rudbeckia and salvia, but harder-to-find genera like lewisia, leptinella and verbascum. In true indie fashion, hand-written timely hints were posted, reminding shoppers to put out their spring veggies, but "don't plant basil yet!"

Stauffer's of Kissel Hill

This local chain, some of whose eight stores include grocery markets, had the widest selection of ornamental grasses, including multiple varieties of miscanthus (maiden grass) just breaking dormancy.

This was the only place I saw Chick Charms. Breeder/collector Chris Hansen's brainchild is arguably the most retail-ready program ever marketed in any plant category. And nicely timed to feed our consumers' continuing love affair with succulents. Here they were, neatly presented, preplanted in mixed containers in a terrific color blend. Irresistible.

SKH also had a nice customer-friendly touch: Posted at the exit was the warning, "Brrr! It's cold outside! Let us sleeve your plants before you go."

Lowe's

Spring hadn't fully sprung at Big Blue when I stopped by. Most of the color was concentrated in the Easter flower selection, i.e., forced lilies, tulips, hyacinths, mums and such. Some perennial prices were actually a little higher than at the two indies, which always makes me smile.

IGCs have a rep, often but not always accurate, for being more expensive than the box stores. I used to advise indies: If you find you're cheaper than the big box, for God's sake don't tell anybody! Just quietly raise your price.

But that was long ago, nearly pre-Internet, and the big box in question was Kmart. RIP. I'm not sure it's still good advice, now that everybody can see everything online.

Steadily or sporadically, Spring's many promises are being fulfilled. At a nearby wildflower refuge I strolled past native aquilegia, mertensia, claytonia, dicentra and trillium. There was even a patch of showy orchid (*Galearis*), although it wasn't very showy yet. And your basil is probably well along.

But as a friend who grew up on a Pennsylvania farm reminded me, "Winter isn't over until the snakes are out on the rocks, sunning themselves. Robins are optimists. Snakes know." **GP**

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