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Showtime!

John Friel



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It's come and gone again: As I type, the Philadelphia Flower Show is wrapping up Day 4 of its 195th year of delighting gardeners. I caught PFS on Day 3, and as usual, it dazzled.

Don't expect an unbiased report here. How would I rate PFS on a scale of one-to-whatever? One would equal "Great!" and it would go up from there.

It's impossible to avoid superlatives when discussing this gathering. If there were a Seven Horticultural Wonders of the World, PFS would easily make the cut.

America's largest, longest-running hort event is comparable in area to that other famous show in Chelsea, UK, but attendance-wise, PFS eclipses it by tens of thousands. Since Chelsea's an outdoor summer gig, other comparisons are problematic, so let's just not. The International Festivals and Events Association named PFS the Best Event in the World, topping the Tournament of Roses, Kentucky Derby and Indy 500. Pretty heady company.

Eschewing Philadelphia's notoriously nasty traffic and impossible parking, I took the train. An hour of rail travel in America is by turns pleasing and appalling: There's no right side of the tracks in our trash-strewn corridors. It seems urban railways achieve aesthetic value only when reborn as linear parks after years of ugly abandonment.

But that was a good segue to "A Beautiful Disturbance," a large, plant-packed, counterintuitively optimistic installation imagining the re-wilding of a vacant, littered city lot. Designer Kelly Norris, erstwhile phenom and now seasoned industry veteran, took home multiple awards for this impressive debut. Kelly hasn't paused for breath since the Perennial Plant Association anointed him Young Professional of the Year back in 2011.

Another newcomer of note: PlantPop, a quirky maker of horticultural films whose Executive Producer Art Parkerson contributes industry insight to both sides of this publication. I was riveted by exquisite time-lapse shots of irises and aquilegias opening new blossoms, compressing hours into seconds.

Others—platycodon, gardenia—unfurl on PlantPop.com. But that's hardly all these artists do: They tell stories about inspiring gardens and creative gardeners. Their "About" page explains, "We believe that philosophy began in the garden, that culture starts with cultivation and that growing is the highest art ... PlantPop can show the world that plants and people connect every day." A perfect fit for the 2024 PFS theme, "United By Flowers."

Cleverest new (to me) hardgoods: Sleek, ceramic Node wall planters. Looking for a way to display a staghorn fern, the inventor found inspiration in their natural habitat: tree crotches, AKA nodes.

My inner gearhead gravitated to the world's first riding lawn mower, built in England in 1910 and still operational by some brave soul. It looked pretty brutal. The driver perched on an unpadded steel tractor seat over metal rollers and multiple exposed chains, blades and gears. It's a self-propelled liability lawsuit waiting to happen, but hey, YOLO, right?

PFS is a major fundraiser for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, which never misses an opportunity to spread what they call "the transformative power of gardening." It's an apt phrase: All you need do is watch attendees' eyes widen as they enter.

Weekday mornings are the least-crowded, but it's still lots of people. Some years, I've had the good fortune to avoid the crush. Once I got to attend the formal-dress, pre-opening gala. It's a hoot to stroll near-empty aisles in a tux, champagne flute in hand, no standing on tiptoe to see past hordes all trying to ogle, gush over and photograph the same display at the same time.

Other years brought private, blissfully uncrowded tours with fellow garden writers. But y'know what? It's better to be part of the horde. How else to see those faces light up or hear that big burly guy growl to his significant other, pointing at an elegantly-poised mannequin with a yards-long flowing "coif" of roses, carnations and baby's breath, "Now, this one speaks to me"?

If you make your living in horticulture and haven't been to PFS, you really owe it to yourself. I envy you that first immersion. And if you like big round numbers, 2029 marks the show's 200th anniversary. Fingers crossed: See you at that party. **GP**

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