

GROWERTALKS

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The Perennial Cynic

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Disposable Ideas

Recently, this space celebrated the demise of my most-loathed marketing canard. The very bad idea that brand identity outranks product quality has died a much-deserved, unmourned, overdue death.

The canard is dead. Long live the canard.

I'm still hearing, from more and more quarters, the high-concept argument that we're not in the plant business, we're supplying decorators with decorations. Granted, this applies principally to potted plants—annuals and tropicals—of the flowering and foliage persuasions. This view is not entirely without merit.

Potted annuals adorn the deck, porch or patio for a time and then, inevitably, cease to serve that function. They get too big, stop flowering, or collapse in an early frost. Tropicals are usually house pets, often with yard privileges in good weather, that scurry indoors for winter. Fine and dandy.

Most perennial growers aren't talking this "decoration" talk—yet. Traditionally, perennials occupied a niche in the consumer's mind next door to that of shrubs—i.e., tough, sturdy living things with a longer life cycle than a hanging basket or annual combo planter. An investment, not a disposable gewgaw with a looming expiration date.

But what happens anywhere in horticulture eventually percolates through the entire green food chain. We're all scrambling to catch up to new marketplace realities: a more diverse buying public, fewer real dirt-under-the-nails gardeners, and gradually decreasing numbers of wholesale growers and retail sellers—a shortening, in short, of market channels.

In the process, we're conspiring to condition growers and consumers to care less about the perennialness of a given perennial, more about its short-term usefulness as a spot of color in a mixed planting. Just another smear of color in a form that's unavailable elsewhere. Hence, perennials get more annualized every season.

This mindset assumes that color trumps all else, that consumers are creatures of low intelligence, prone to impulses they can't control, but we can. I'm uncomfortable with such presumptuous assumptions. I think we're conspiring against ourselves.

The upside, of course, is repeat sales. We like repeat sales. We're funny that way. But—and this is a large but—de-emphasizing the hardiness of hardy plants pits them against annuals and tropicals in an arena not suited to their strengths.

It's no secret that most perennials don't flower as long as most annuals. That's not a fault; it's nature. But it becomes a fault when we render resiliency irrelevant. A perennial's most precious gift is, as always, its ability to resurrect itself time and again, Phoenix-like, from last season's slime and ashes.

Many excellent plants come up short if the only criteria are color, color and more color. Can Sedum 'Autumn Fire' match mums for longevity of bloom or number of blooms? Can even Geranium 'Rozanne' go toe-to-toe with annual pseudo-geraniums (Pelargonium), if the only measure that measures up is flower power?

A perennial at its peak, alone or in combination, is a questionable buy for the gardener whose reward for her investment is to watch that plant's rapid decline. Add all this up, and perennial growers might well conclude that current market strategies are self-defeating over the long haul.

It says here, perennialness really does matter. If you doubt it, ask any gardener who bought an alleged perennial that proved to be no such thing. Consumers, our ultimate customers, have long memories—as do their gurus, the nation's garden writers. We incur their wrath at our peril.

Last spring I helped at a benefit plant sale for the American Cancer Society. At day's end, we discarded hundreds of pots and flats. They were all old stock or overruns anyway. From the jaded plant professional's viewpoint, no big deal.

But our volunteers—civilians, gardeners, non-professionals—were aghast at the waste. One lady literally could not watch as we hardened veterans emptied benches into dumpsters. I found it amusing then, but not now. I've realized that we taught that poor lady the wrong lesson.

These words are forming on my screen in late December, so here's my New Year's wish: May the disposable decor idea remain an annual, not a perennial, fetish.