

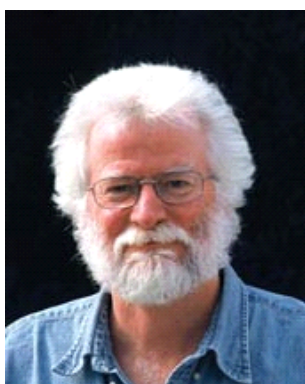
GROWERTALKS

The Friel World

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Friel World: Pots and Potables

John Friel



That time of year again. The woodstove is back in service about every other night. Geese march noisily overhead like troops in training, wedging the sky apart, shifting among feeding grounds. Leaves freckle lawns. The tulip poplar out front has finally stopped basting my car with syrupy sap.

Most telling of all: Mums are in season. I'm shooting them at every opportunity on my favorite hunting grounds in New Jersey. There's no limit, and my trophies will be proudly displayed in catalogs to come: Look at the rack on this baby!

Photographing plants sounds simple, and it certainly is easier than growing them. But, like growing them, it's very easy to do badly. Getting either right involves work both physical and mental, good timing and sometimes luck. At the end of a hot September day, when visions of tall frosty glasses swim into the viewfinder, it's time to quit.

At our recent Garden Mum Field Day, another rite of fall, brokers and customers gathered to see new introductions, get cultural tips, and hear disease updates. The trials are held at Lucas Greenhouses, home of head grower and fellow columnist Joe Moore.

Our breeder, Mark Smith, a perfectionist's perfectionist, explained that cool June nights, a vicious August hailstorm and a new feeding regimen caused this year's crop to finish a bit smaller and in some cases earlier than usual. Varieties that typically grow into one another were instead neat globes; colors were more intense in some cases, less so in others. And so on.

Unlike the assembled professionals, who pride themselves on cookie-cutter crops, I found these troubling phenomena perversely encouraging. I came to mums via perennials. With perennials, one accepts and even celebrates a little variation. A perennial garden evolves through seasons: Echinacea self-sows; Monarda annexes new territory; something blooms early, late or not at all. Even in wholesalers' rows, no two pots look precisely alike.

Not so with mums. Mass-produced monoculture, modern genetics distilling centuries of breeding and well-honed protocols produce such astonishing consistency, I could almost pick pots to shoot by Braille. Mark and

his predecessors have conditioned retailers and consumers to expect perfection. Anything less rarely makes it to market anymore.

So it tickled me that even this ultra-domesticated life form, whose obsequiousness makes the most fawning canine seem like a tattooed rebel, can still express some individuality. Sorry, Mark and Joe, but such self-expression, however minute, gladdens my inner iconoclast.

But while I loved hearing about the variations, I couldn't see them. That sea of color looked as perfectly uniform as ever. I thought of beer again, not because I was thirsty but because of what a beer maker once told me. When not pestering plants, I write other stuff. Working on a piece for an entertainment paper, I once interviewed a brewmeister at a very large brewery, the one with the giant horses.

This gentleman's job is to ensure not only quality but uniformity. Say you're flying coast-to-coast, he explained. You have a beer at JFK. Between planes at O'Hare you have another, and finally one more in LA. Each beer is the same brand, his brand; but each can or bottle hails from a different brewery using products from local suppliers. Despite regional and seasonal differences in water, grain and hops, the corporate mantra is that "New York tastes like Chicago tastes like Los Angeles."

The wholesale grower's job is similar: No matter what cards nature deals, come hail or high pH water, they pull batch after identical batch out of the oven each year. By the gallon or by the pint, the product must satisfy consumer tastes and expectations.

Just as Mark and Joe see variations invisible to me, that brewmeister can probably taste differences our hypothetical traveler couldn't detect. Unlike Mark and Joe, he'll probably never admit it. Which is one of many reasons to toast this industry at day's end: We share information like no one else. We're that kind of people, it's that time of year and I'm late for the field. Still some late-bloomers to shoot. Looks like good light today.

John Friel is marketing manager of Yoder Brothers' Green Leaf Perennials brand and a freelance writer.