

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Perennials in a Peachy State

John Friel

Perennial Plant of the Year 2012

The choice of *Brunnera macrophylla* Jack Frost elicited praise, and a few complaints. All agree this Walters Gardens discovery is an excellent plant, with a beautiful, silver “crackle finish” over green veins and edges. But some believe that patented plants should not be eligible for Plant of the Year honors. Others chafe at restrictions on Jack Frost, as there are only about a dozen licensees nationwide.

Tours

PPA's tours are a major draw to the Symposium. Even the bus rides are a networking opportunity, not just transportation. Five tours on four days visited 21 gardens, growers and retailers. Anybody can go to public gardens— that's why they're called that—but PPA's site committees arrange visitation rights to fine private gardens, places out-of-towners wouldn't even know existed. Some highlights:

Ryan Gainey Garden

A personal favorite: the “Garden of Poetry and Prose” at the Decatur, Georgia, home of designer, consultant, lecturer and raconteur Ryan Gainey, where formality coexists cheerfully with whimsy. Five Jack Russell terriers escorted visitors around this emphatically personal space, where eight distinctive garden rooms are artfully carved from a deep urban lot.



Atlanta Botanical Garden

In just 35 years, ABG has become one of America's most-visited public gardens. An amazing medley of botanical treasures is packed into these 30 acres. The innovative Kendeda Canopy Walk is a wide, winding, 600-ft. path suspended above woodland gardens. Naturally, there are perennial borders, water features with obligatory Chihuly glass sculpture, and conservatories housing exotics, tropicals, desert plants and orchids.

A glass sculpture by artist Dale Chihuly adorns a water feature at Atlanta Botanical Garden.

AmericasMart

A “department store for retailers,” this complex comprises three tall buildings and 7 million sq. ft. of sales area. Wear comfortable shoes and nosh your way through gourmet food displays, with everything from barbecue to chips and salsa to wild hibiscus blossoms in syrup, and more kinds of chocolate than you knew existed. Oof!

PPA members enjoyed four floors of garden center goods: original outdoor art, wind chimes from tiny to titanic, tools, stonework, stained glass, furniture, flags, ponds, outdoor kitchens and much more. There were lots of products for fairy gardens, a niche whose appeal escapes me. Apparently the target market is gardeners with young children or grandchildren to amuse. Having neither, I find them too cute for their own good. But there’s money in them, so pass the Dramamine and bring on the cuteness.

Garden*Hood

Garden*Hood, a hip inner-city retailer, is edgy and urban to the bone, with tongue-in-cheek flourishes lurking around every corner. Sales “beds” full of potted perennials and shrubs have headboards and footboards. Old shoes are repurposed as flowerpots. Sneakers and loafers worked well, but not high-heeled pumps: all the soil slumped downhill into the toe. Co-owner is Scott McMahan, who spoke at the Symposium on his global plant exploration. Predictably, the selection isn’t that of your average GC. But it’s the South, so there is a bottle tree.

Gibbs Gardens

Gibbs Gardens is a private Eden about to go public. Come March 2012, anyone will be welcome to stroll the 300-acre estate of landscaper Jim Gibbs. PPA members got a preview of the exquisite balance Gibbs has struck between the natural beauty of the wooded, hilly, stream-braided property, and the man-made beauty of carefully integrated structures, sculptures, perennial beds and rose arbors.

Oakland Cemetery

Why a graveyard? Because this 1850 landmark was fashioned in the European tradition of garden cemeteries and public parks. Ancient trees and stately gardens surround elaborate headstones and grand mausoleums. The highest point served as an observation post during the Battle of Atlanta; nearly 7,000 Confederate soldiers are interred here. After decades of neglect, Oakland’s plantings are being restored with an emphasis on species used before 1910.

University of Georgia Trial Gardens

In 1982, Drs. Allan Armitage and Michael Dirr started with “a bunch of PanAm seeds and a few dollars.” Now, their extensive trials are internationally known. Breeders worldwide send plants and seeds. Perennials remain in the garden at least three years, with data collection beginning after the first winter.

At a previous Symposium, Dr. Armitage urged the PPA to launch its own trial program. The Association is doing just that. Spearheading the effort is Jimmy Turner of Dallas Arboretum, the PPA’s Southern Region Director.

Vince Dooley Garden

When I asked, “Vince Who?” Georgians reacted as if I’d asked, “Barack Who?” Upon retiring, this college

football legend took up gardening, auditing courses taught by hort legends Armitage and Dirr. He's been gaining yardage ever since. "Coach" wrote a book, Vince Dooley's Garden, and hit the lecture circuit, blending football, flora and fanciful humor. He jokes that when learning how to arrange the plants he liked, he tried the I-formation as a landscape pattern.

Classic Groundcovers

Those who stayed for post-symposium tours lunched at this 100-acre nursery, the "Home of Sudden Service," with 100,000 sq. ft. of greenhouses near Athens—not far from UGA, alma mater of owner Wilbur Mull and General Manager Wally Pressey. The firm grows 130 varieties of groundcover plants and other perennials.

Saul Nurseries/Itsaul Plants

Breeders Richard and Bobby Saul are best known for their Big Sky series of Echinacea. They've also launched perennials, like Coreopsis Jethro Tull, and non-hardy items like Alternanthera. Partnering with Creek Hill Nursery, they market and distribute Pennisetum Fireworks. Many of their introductions were on display at their wholesale yard, a.k.a. "The Swamp," but their breeding location was off-limits. A secretive, competitive lot, those breeders.

Speakers & Topics

Dr. Allen Armitage and John Elsley

Any plant conference would be honored to have either of these names on its speaker slate, let alone both. British-trained Elsley, formerly of Wayside Gardens and Song Sparrow Nursery, put a historical spin on perennial gardening. Armitage looked more to the future of the industry, and made it clear that rumors of his retirement are years premature.

Invasives

The issue that everyone wishes would just go away, won't. Legislation already on the books, and more in the works, has the potential to dramatically impact commercial horticulture. Plantsman and consultant John Peter Thompson urged professionals to become part of the conversation as regulations are written. We're all stakeholders with a vested interest in getting it right.



Allen Bush receives the Award of Merit from outgoing PPA President John Hoffman.

Award of Merit

The PPA's highest award honors individuals with a distinguished history of contributions to the industry. This year's honoree is Allen Bush. Now with Jelitto Seeds' U.S. branch in Louisville, Kentucky, Allen is the founder of Holbrook Farm Nursery, correspondent for the Human Flower Project, and plant explorer. Allen's is the face that comes immediately to mind when I hear the phrase, "Southern gentleman." GT

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