

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Frielisms

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Twenty years ago, I stumbled across a copy of Green Leaf Enterprises' Broker Bullet newsletter and discovered a writer named John Friel. His thoughtful words flowed like jazz music and I had to have him in my magazine. Luckily, by penning what must have been a powerfully persuasive letter, I entreated him to join us. His first column was "Perennial Cynic" in *GrowerTalks*, which later became "Friel World" in *Green Profit*.

In celebration of Friel's 20 years, I decided to reread his columns and select some juicy tidbits to share. A noble idea, but naïve, as I made it through only a few years before hitting my word limit. Below are some examples of his wordsmithing.

(Oh, before you read on, I owe Friel one public apology, for an edit I made to his August 2002 column titled "My Dog Google," about the new search engine

and how he had Googled his name and all the other John Friels he found. The last line said, "To Google yourself is to know yourselves." I stupidly changed it to the singular "yourself." Sorry, Frielster!)

Now, enjoy this collection of Frielisms:

Every grower ... knows deep down that you can't grow it for a buck, sell it for 99 cents and make it up on volume. You don't need some wise-guy columnist to drill you in basic math.

Perennial growers, the on-ramp is ending. The tank is full. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir is singing "Highway to Hell." Change the station, check your mirrors and seatbelt, and make it a smooth merge, not a total absorption. Remember, the sign says "yield," not "surrender."

Yes, it's scary to step out of your comfort zone. Yes, policy, tradition and consistency are good and necessary things. But successful companies honor their spirit as well as their letter. Look carefully at the shapes of things that don't seem to fit your tradition. Remember that once upon a time, you did for the first time everything you now do every time.

A perennial border is evolution on fast-forward, a watercolor in the rain, changing weekly as various species segue in and out of bloom—and yearly as its constituents dominate or yield, flourish or succumb, according to their natures.

Martha has achieved one-name celebrity, like Cher or Sting. Or Medusa.

A flier develops a disquieting degree of empathy with those truckloads of cattle one encounters on the highway—crammed into noisy, uncomfortable quarters, hemmed in by hordes of their malodorous ilk, all of them scared and unable to move about. If you gave the steers cell phones, and if you stapled boarding passes to our ears, we'd be hard to tell apart.

Call me a Luddite (go ahead, I'm used to it), but I think plants, however ornamental, are more than ornaments. Perennials, especially, are nothing short of living, breathing miracles. Each spring in the garden can be—should be—an occasion for celebration, a time to welcome old friends back from their long winter's nap.

... the Brits were advanced, accomplished gardeners when we were ... well, when we WEREN'T, period! If archeologists conclude that Stonehenge was just an overbuilt pergola in need of a bit of maintenance, I'll be shocked, but not surprised.

For years, perennial growers inhabited a tiny little eddy on the cusp of horticulture's rip-roaring main current. But as perennials became more popular, we were pulled out into the mainstream. That's where we are now, out there with the destroyers, the barges and the pirate ships, rowing for our lives.

My hat is off to the impulsive person who first put down his glass and said, "I'm bored. Let's paint poinsettias." It was a stroke of genius, despite the traditionalist's qualms ... Heck, the main tradition surrounding poinsettias is the tradition of losing money, or at best breaking even, growing them. You'd think anyone who devised a way to boost the price of the industry's designated loss-leader would be hailed like ... well, like a Messiah. Let us bring him silver and gold glitter!

The old-timers always told me, "Hard times are good times in this industry. That's when people stay home and plant gardens."

*I'm of Irish descent, which is another way of saying I'm just stubborn enough to keep insisting that we're still very much in the plant business dammit, and that this stubborn truth still holds: If we grow good plants, all else falls into place. If we don't, we're on our way to becoming an interesting history lesson. **GT***