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Creating A Showplace

Several members of the *GPN* staff just returned from Garden Centers Of America's (GCA) Fashion In Bloom (FIB) event, a Pack Trials-type tour on the East Coast. Like Pack Trials, attendees travel from stop to stop, visiting breeders and touring growers/retailers looking at new varieties and getting display ideas. Unlike Pack Trials, the attendees come in small carloads and are fewer in number, which gives everyone a lot of time to visit.

It was the same at last year's event, then named Eastern Performance Trials (EPT). That was where the idea of creating a showplace for American horticulture was first mentioned to me. We were boiling in the 100° F heat while touring the River Farm stop, home of the American Horticultural Society (AHS). First John Gaydos from Proven Winners then Joel Goldsmith from Goldsmith Seeds talked of their involvement with the property, how it had become more than just an event location for them and how it was now part of their plan to expose people to our industry.

Their rationale goes like this: Our industry needs a showplace — somewhere people can admire the beauty of our product and get inspired about their own gardens. An American version of Amsterdam's famous bulb garden, the Keukenhof, if you will. With its proximity to the nation's capital, tourist status and affiliation with AHS, River Farm seemed like the ideal location.

Needless to say, I was intrigued, and after visiting River Farm again at this year's GCA event, I got a renewed enthusiasm about this project that I would like to share with you.

Why River Farm?

Planned around a beautiful 17th century home that was at one time owned by George Washington, River Farm would be an ideal seat for our industry. The property sits atop a small hill that overlooks the Potomac River and slopes down to the water. River Farm's 25 acres include a children's garden, a woodland area and one of the best azalea collections in the country.

Probably more important than the actual property itself is River Farm's association with AHS. AHS is the premier gardening society in the United States and offers programs and informa-

tion to gardeners all over the country. If you love gardening, you are probably familiar with AHS. It was established in 1922 and is one of the oldest national gardening organizations in the country. AHS has an active Web site that gardeners turn to every day; this organization teaches and influences gardeners, and until GCA started EPT/FIB, there were no annuals on the property.

What's The Problem?

So if we buy the argument that our industry needs a showplace and that River Farm should be the location for that showplace, what's the problem? Why don't we get together with AHS and start planting?

The short answer is money. AHS is funded by voluntary contributions and does not have the funding to tackle this project. I don't want to say the property is in disrepair, but a ton of infrastructure work is needed at River Farm. The grounds have no irrigation system, so everything is watered by hand. There are few proper flowerbeds, and the shallow topsoil layer is followed by a thick layer of clay that has been compacted by decades of foot and car traffic.

That's where we come in. Our industry will benefit from potential customers seeing a beautifully landscaped property. We should take some ownership and work with Katy Moss Warner, Tom Underwood and the staff at AHS. What's needed? In-kind donations from growers and manufacturers are desperately needed: Plant material, irrigation supplies, top soil and many other products will eventually be needed, but right now, the biggest need is for money. We can send all of the plants we want, but if there is no staff to water, the plants won't live. AHS desperately needs a new well (which I understand is being drilled) and more full-time staff to care for the grounds.

It's hard to go to the industry when margins are tight and consumption is stagnant and ask for contributions, but study after study shows that in times like this it's best to invest. I encourage you to check out www.ahs.org to learn more about the association and contact Tom Underwood to find out how you can help. As an industry, we need to do something to attract new gardeners, and this might just be one of the ways to do it. GPN

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