

Insights from a Plant Geek

BY JASMINA DOLCE



He may or may not need an introduction, but I'd like to introduce you to Michael Perry, also known as Mr. Plant Geek. We had a chance to formally meet at Cultivate'17, and I have thoroughly enjoyed picking his brain ever since.

gpn: Hi Michael! Can you please introduce yourself to our readers?

MP: I am a freelancer with the pseudonym Mr. Plant Geek. I have been in the industry for over 20 years, and was previously with the largest mail order plant company in the United Kingdom, Thompson & Morgan. Nowadays, I work on product development, provide consultancy to horticultural startup companies, and present on TV in the U.K. and the U.S.

gpn: Where did your interest in horticulture begin? And what led you to your current profession?

MP: I was addicted from a very early age, as my grandparents were keen horticulturists. I was always pottering in the garden with them, and even started working on school gardens during my teenage years. I actually began at Thompson & Morgan after winning a competition to design a garden at their premises. The week after, I wrote to them and asked for a job!

gpn: Tell me about your recent visit to Ohio this past summer. Cultivate'17 was your first time at this show, correct?

MP: Yes, my first time in Ohio, and at Cultivate! It was amazing how many people I knew already. It was super fun to meet people I had originally met on social media, and connect in real time. The show helped me to discover how horticulture works in the U.S., and the types of products consumers favor.

gpn: What were your goals and expectations at Cultivate'17? Was there anything that was surprising to you?

MP: I was completely open and ready to learn. Despite the standard trade show sequence, I was majorly impressed by the seminars and add-on events, which really helped me make connections and learn more about this new industry.

gpn: Did any sessions or events stand out to you?

MP: I attended the 2018 trends talk by Garden Media Group, and sheesh, I had a notebook full of ideas! My particularly exciting takeaway was wabi-sabi, a new style of gardening, which I have already researched and written about. I think it'll take off soon in the U.K.

gpn: Did you make any valuable connections with industry members ... besides me of course?

MP: Yes! The events and parties really helped with connecting, and generally the culture is less shy. In Europe, these events don't often exist and/or attendees do not mix in the same way.

gpn: Did you have any favorite new products or plants from the show?

MP: I was amazingly excited to see the new blue colored hibiscus hybrids from Texas A&M University, having seen these online previously. I was also very impressed by colored ipomoea and really wish I could grow those in Europe.

gpn: Can you tell me what kind of differences you notice between the U.S. and European markets?

MP: The bedding and patio seems very similar, however there are some exceptions such as vinca and ipomoea. But, once you get into exotics, it's entirely different and I am so jealous of the range of items you can offer!

gpn: Are there any events or shows in Europe that would be valuable for U.S. growers, retailers and horticulturists to attend?

MP: The Flower Trials in The Netherlands would be perfect; the Dutch are incredibly innovative and create some amazing displays. Plus, of course, the Chelsea Flower Show — which is great for everyone!

gpn: What trends and/or changes do you see happening in the industry in the next few years?

MP: I think consumers will continue to respond well to recipes and step-by-step guides, especially as amateurs and time-short consumers get more engaged with our world. We must back this up with reliable, well-chosen plant varieties.

gpn: I think our industry has to find new, unique ways to reach younger consumers and make gardening more part of pop

culture. I think your apparel line is a great way to do this. Can you tell me about your online shop and how it got started?

MP: I have created a unique range of clothes, which are linked to horticulture in various ways, whilst still appealing to non-plantspeople. From the cheeky names of “rude botany” to the very modern “virtual garden,” they are unique and being purchased by many different types of people. There’s also some very eye-catching “plants and potions” tees, with phrases such as ‘beer and begonias’ emblazoned across them — they sure get some attention!

gpn: **Are there other trends you see in the industry that aim at capturing a younger audience?**

MP: I think plant crafts, like fairy gardens, terrariums and kokedama, are ultra cool and something to show off on Instagram, which is perfect for the younger generation.

gpn: **Your career has thrived on the internet, especially through social media. Do you see this being a trend in horticulture — utilizing tools that the web has to offer?**

MP: Yes, for sure! I share my travels with a very wide, and expanding, audience. It also helps us feel more connected, with what would often be quite a solitary industry. Social media became a lifeline for estate gardeners, for example. I translate online to offline very well, and make a real effort to do so.

gpn: **Do you have any favorite websites or social media pages?**

MP: I love following specialist plant society pages, but also excited — and exciting — people on Instagram!

gpn: **What’s next for you?**

MP: I am travelling a lot,

and following different opportunities. I will be back on HSN in the spring with a range of interesting plants and accessories. My consultancy work continues, as does the

building of my own profile via social media and other activities. I am also pitching a new TV show in the U.K., so watch this space! **gpn**



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