

New Markets for Native Plants

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A friend of mine was fond of quoting an ancient Chinese curse that went, “May you live in interesting times.” I must admit that I never did understand what was supposed to be so bad about living in such a state of change and flux as we now find ourselves. *These are exciting times!* In the nursery trade as well as the “real” world. What do native plants have to do with any of this? The current fashionable focus on this group of plants provides many marketing opportunities.

It is finally becoming noticed, certainly not yet common knowledge, that growing and maintaining plants is positive and lifegiving to the gardener as well as to the planetary ecology at large. The increasing interest in natives provides a chance for growers, gardeners, researchers and the whole green industry to be viewed in a better, more positive light. We can be seen as friends of nature, pointing out forgotten (newly discovered?) interconnectedness between the plant world and the rest of the web of life—the wind, water, soil, and animal life. We can grow as a profession and respond to the ever changing needs of our increasingly sophisticated and ecologically conscious public. We must be prepared to meet the challenge of steering the focus of our industry beyond mere ornamentation to broader, more inclusive and lifegiving concepts.

The discussion of native plants single handedly brings horticulture into a broader context; the questions that are asked and their answers point to areas of expansion and potential improvement for our professional growth and marketing efforts. Is this plant better adapted to my site? What other purposes does it serve? Will it be more self sustaining? Will it look artificial or natural and comfortable?

All of this points to the need for more education—education that could and should point the way forward to a broader based and more widely appreciated field of activity

By focusing on the restoration aspects of horticulture we can reach out to our natural allies in the environmental and conservation fields and provide a real answer to their most persistent question. What can I do to be a positive force ecologically? You can build or create a habitat, plant trees, landscape your pond or plant native wild flowers and grasses and take up butterfly attracting rather than lawn mowing

New markets come in many sizes and shapes. Parks, municipalities and some landscape architects have successfully tried planting large numbers of small plants or plugs directly out in the landscape. Others have had growers provide “sods” of mixed plants that were installed in strips. Water tolerant plants are now grown in fiber mats or carpets and staked at the water line to provide erosion control and rapid plant cover in one fell swoop. People are selling wild flower hay that can be used as a mulch. Here in the mid-Atlantic especially, there is a crying need for a regional seed house providing local genotypes of grasses, forbs and shrubs

Highway departments are now required to spend 1/2% of their landscape budgets on native plants with on highway construction . This regulation was championed by Ladybird Johnson. Municipalities are taking interest in landscaping traffic islands as ways to make their communities more attractive places to live and work.

Parks and aquariums have educational, interpretive and display areas that are increasingly being planted to native plants. Appropriately chosen plants can help lower maintenance costs and add a sense of harmony to landscapes that are often patterned after Disney World, rather than a feeling for the unique beauty of a specific site.

Schools are greatly expanding their environmental education programs. Someone has to provide for bogs, habitats and butterfly gardens as places to study and enjoy nature as well as gain an appreciation for the pivotal role that plants play in the whole process. What a great opportunity to encourage future plant people!

Several retail mail order firms have done quite well of late by either accenting the native plants they do grow or by specializing in native plants. It is becoming fashionable to tout the provenance of a given plant.

By making the connection between nature and the products they sell, leading retailers have increased sales in tough times, stretched their busy season right through the fall, and remade their image in a positive way. Garden centers can become involved in nature society plant sales, letting people know that they just might have that wild flower, groundcover or oakleaf hydrangea they've read, seen or heard about.

Home landscapers are yearning for ways to bring more life into their properties, to lower their energy costs, to enhance their sense of privacy and to mow less lawn. These plants can provide fertile ground for innovative solutions. Plants that attract butterflies are always good to add excitement and to give the feeling that the customer is receiving extra value. Native trees like sugar maple and ash are fantastic shade givers and they will not become pernicious weeds like Norway maple and Japanese honeysuckle have

Wetland water quality laws now in effect often specify that a good proportion, if not all of a disturbed area must be revegetated with native plants. Often plants of local provenance are to be given preference. There will be a good bit more wetlands work once the new highway bill becomes law. All classes of wetlands plants will be needed—grasses, forbs, trees, and shrubs.

Landfills and superfund sites all need to be revegetated. The Freshkills Landfill, not far from here, installed many thousands of trees and shrubs on highly visible edges and other special areas as well as 40,000 grass plugs in a one acre experimental area. The landfill consists of 1600 acres. All of this material was specified to be native plants. Many of these plants were custom grown for this project. The market is there for those nurseries specializing in these plants. It is crucial to get to be known for growing certain groups of plants. If you try to grow and be known for having everything, you will end up being known for nothing.

Fund raisers benefit both the organization and the supplier who is wise enough to be aligned with them. A local conservancy ordered small quantities of wild flowers for its May sale every year. We were friendly, flexible and patient; 2- years ago they were asked by the state highway department to consult and recommend strategies for planting several sweeps of indigenous Pennsylvania wild flowers

over a 22 mi stretch of highway. Guess who they thought of first? Fifty thousand native grasses and forbs now grace that highway

Who knows where a little goodwill will lead? The new generation of landscape architects are much more sensitive to environmental concerns. Many times I've heard, "Geez, if I'd have known that ironweed was available, I would have been using it for years!" Letting your client base know that you are happy to talk to them about custom growing a new plant or new sizes, etc. will reap dividends.

With this accent on native plants, it is not my intention to get people to stop growing exotics, not at all. Many plants from all over the world are fabulous and indispensable in our gardening palettes. We are challenged to gain a new appreciation of the beauty that we are surrounded by and to get over our inferiority complex about the desirability of our indigenous flora. New ways of appreciating the beauty and utility of these plants will naturally lead to new growth opportunities.

In summary, it is time to move beyond ornamentation toward an enlightened sense of utility; beyond pretty to embrace the multitudinous life-giving qualities that plants possess. Let's make that connection between today and tomorrow's green consumer and our green goods.

MONDAY MORNING 9 DECEMBER 1991

The morning session was convened at 8:00 a.m. with Joseph Dallan, Jr. serving as moderator.