

Responding to the Increased Demand for Native Plants

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Over the last 10 years or so, a strong trend towards specifying native species has developed across the country. The origins of this trend date back to environmental movement of the 1970s. Today, practically every issue of the *American Nurseryman* has something about the subject. The push for native plants has understandably raised the ire of many growers who have spent entire careers developing and producing hybrids and exotic species. But for more and more nurseries, the move towards native plants is providing new opportunities.

With numerous introduced species, such as purple loosestrife and phragmites, taking over thousands of acres of native habitat, environmental regulators have attempted to stem the tide by legislating against the used of non-native species. Even the White House has gotten involved as President Clinton issued a memorandum calling for “environmentally and economically beneficial landscaping” practices at federal facilities and federally funded projects. The memorandum specifically equates the use of “regionally native plants” with such landscaping (Eco-Watch, 1994).

In addition, many landscape architects have discovered the beauty and hardiness of indigenous species and have begun specifying natives on commercial and residential projects. While this has led to a significant increase in the demand for natives, the most important factor has been the passage of the federal Clean Water Act of 1977. The result of this legislation is that in most cases, the loss or disturbance of wetlands in one area must be “mitigated” by the creation or enhancement of wetlands in another. From a growers standpoint, this legislation is wonderful news because it has opened up a totally new market for nursery stock.

One of the primary goals of wetland mitigation is to duplicate the values and functions of the disturbed site. Depending upon the area, various species of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants are required. Certain native plants have been grown by the nursery trade for many years. Recently, a number of large, progressive nurseries have begun to grow some of the more popular wetland mitigation species such as *Clethra alnifolia*, *Ilex verticillata*, *Aronia arbutifolia*, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, and *Quercus palustris* (Table 1). During that same time span, many small, exclusively native plant nurseries have sprung up to meet the demand for some of the more obscure species such as *Salix nigra*, *Rhododendron viscosum*, *Sambucus canadensis*, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, and *Chamaecyparis thyoides* (Table 1).

In regard to herbaceous wetland plants, few native species are available in the nursery trade other than those used in water gardening, such as *Iris versicolor*, *Pontederia cordata*, and *Nymphaea odorata*. Although grasses, sedges, and rushes are very common, most are not that ornamental. But since they are an integral part of the wetlands habitat, they are required on mitigation plans. Some of the herbaceous plants most often specified are *Schoenoplectus validus* (syn. *Scirpus validus*), *Carex crinata*, *Leersia oryzoides*, *Sagittaria latifolia*, and *Typha latifolia*. One obstacle to growers interested in propagating native herbaceous plants is that they can be difficult to identify. Field identification is crucial since there are few

reliable commercial sources of seed. While there is a strong demand for these species, only those growers with the capability to identify and collect their own seed are able to propagate them.

Table 1. Wetland mitigation species of the mid-Atlantic states.

Common in nursery trade		
Trees	Shrubs	Herbaceous
<i>Acer rubrum</i>	<i>Amelanchier</i> sp.	<i>Hibiscus moscheutos</i>
<i>Betula nigra</i>	<i>Aronia arbutifolia</i>	<i>Iris versicolor</i>
<i>Fraxinus pennsylvanica</i>	<i>Clethra alnifolia</i>	<i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>
<i>Liquidambar styraciflua</i>	<i>Cornus stolonifera</i>	<i>Nymphae odorata</i>
<i>Magnolia virginiana</i>	<i>Ilex verticillata</i>	<i>Pontederia cordata</i>
<i>Nyssa sylvatica</i>	<i>Salix discolor</i>	
<i>Quercus palustris</i>	<i>Vaccinium corymbosum</i>	
<i>Quercus phellos</i>	<i>Viburnum dentatum</i>	
Not common in the nursery trade		
<i>Acer negundo</i>	<i>Alnus rugosa</i> (syn. <i>serrulata</i>)	<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>
<i>Acer saccharinum</i>	<i>Cephalanthus occidentalis</i>	<i>Carex lurida</i>
<i>Chamaecyparis thyoides</i>	<i>Cornus amomum</i>	<i>Carex crinata</i>
<i>Platanus occidentalis</i>	<i>Itea virginica</i>	<i>Carex stricta</i>
<i>Quercus bicolor</i>	<i>Lindera benzoin</i>	<i>Juncus effusus</i>
<i>Salix nigra</i>	<i>Rhododendron viscosum</i>	<i>Leersia oryzoides</i>
<i>Rosa palustris</i>	<i>Peltandra virginica</i>	
<i>Sambucus canadensis</i>	<i>Sagittaria latifolia</i>	
	<i>Schoenoplectus validus</i>	
	<i>Scirpus cyperinus</i>	
	<i>Scirpus pungens</i>	
	<i>Typha latifolia</i>	
	<i>Verbena hastata</i>	

Unable or unwilling to propagate, plant collectors readily harvest wild plants from their natural habitat. This practice is one of the greatest threats to legitimate growers. Often times plants are illegally taken from wetland areas or stolen from private property. Only rarely is the stock inspected for insects and diseases prior to shipment to the job site. Even when done legally, depleting one area to enhance another is not an environmentally sound practice.

Another major issue for growers is the philosophy of being "ecologically correct." This involves the concepts of seed source and genetic diversity. Many ecologists argue that in order for a plant to be truly native, it should be grown from seed collected very close to the planting site. For example, they feel it would be wrong to plant a pitch pine in New Hampshire that was grown from seed collected in North

Carolina. More and more frequently, planting specifications call for nursery stock to be grown from seed collected within a certain radius of the job site, such as 100 miles.

Clonal propagation is also very controversial, as some firmly advocate only using seed propagated plants in order to promote genetic diversity. As mentioned earlier, there are plenty of native species already in the nursery trade, but many of them are clonally propagated, such as *Betula nigra* 'Heritage' and *Itea virginica* 'Henry's Garnet'. While the issue is not black and white, in general, seed propagated plants do have more genetic diversity.

Ideally, plants for restoration projects should be propagated from seed collected as close to the planting site as possible. As for species that are difficult to seed propagate, cuttings should be taken from as many different individuals as possible to promote genetic diversity.

While indigenous species are not appropriate for all situations, there is sound logic behind advocating their use. At the present time, native plants are still a small segment of the nursery industry, but that segment is growing rapidly. Many of the largest nurseries in the country have already recognized the opportunity and are profiting from their decision to increase their production of native plants.

LITERATURE CITED

Eco-Watch. 1994. *American Nurseryman* 180(2):13.