



ABSTRACT

Gardening with native plants is becoming more popular as evidenced by the number of new Internet sites, books, publications, and native plant societies. Restoration efforts are also increasing. The increase in both native plant gardening and restoration can be tied to a real or perceived decrease in wild areas and the biological and cultural functions that nature provides. Historical literature suggests that both gardening and restoration efforts are increasing because of strongly held cultural beliefs. Many of these beliefs reflect strong European cultural history, which is embedded in garden history in North America. These cultural traditions remain strong in the US and lead to an increase in efforts to restore and cherish nature, especially to save disappearing wild places and species. Gardening with a restoration focus, such as for sustaining wildlife, will most likely continue as wilder areas continue to be converted to homes and managed landscapes.

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UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL REASONS FOR THE INCREASE IN BOTH RESTORATION EFFORTS AND GARDENING WITH NATIVE PLANTS

| Linda R McMahan

Over the past 30 y, native plant gardening has become increasingly popular in the Pacific Northwest US. Kruckeberg (1996) states “Fifteen years later [after the 1st edition] a minor garden cult has become a major focus of American gardening.” Kruckeberg’s work on gardening with native plants is a standard reference for regional gardeners and his observations substantiate the growing popularity of native plant use. Indeed, gardening with natives has increased throughout the US, Europe, Canada, and Australia, if the proliferating gardening Internet sites in these countries is any indication. Examining the history of gardening, including culture in the Western gardening tradition, helps us explain the trends in native plant gardening and restoration.

This cultural view of nature concept may be new to those of us in biological and horticultural disciplines. As a botanist by training, I have viewed restoration and native plant gardening primarily from the botanical and horticultural perspectives. In broadening my view to include history and culture, I gain an understanding of other reasons for the increasing practice of gardening with native plants. For all of us, a better understanding of motivations for native plant gardening may help us appeal to the factors that motivate homeowners to use native plants in their landscapes. Because of these considerations, I continue to explore how our cultural history may affect both gardening and restoration, particularly when these efforts involve native plants.

NATIVE PLANT GARDENS IN HISTORY

Although I have spent many hours studying dusty horticultural books in several libraries to understand the history of native plant gardening, I have become intrigued by a book by historian

Schama (1995), which examines the view of nature and landscape as it evolved in many European countries over the last several thousand years and in the US. Schama asserts that history has repeated itself many times when it comes to preserving our natural and cultural landscape. He makes connections between our cultural values and our views of nature based on how these are reflected in our managed landscapes. For example, Schama discusses trees as places where gods sleep in Germany, oaks as symbols of revered religions and governmental policies in England, and of wild areas as feared by the conquering Romans in Europe. The cultural myths he examines reveal a widespread respect for nature in our culture that at times becomes reverence.

I believe that general views on nature, restoration, and gardening are closely linked. Gardening in general, but particularly native plant gardening, has increased in the US and abroad as natural areas, and even farmlands, have been replaced by expansion of cities. In the US, interest in native plant gardening first took hold in the East and slowly spread westward over the past 150 to 200 y (Blanchan 1922; Hedrick 1950; Wickens 2000). This move from east to west reflects the general population growth patterns as European-style civilization spread westward.

As natural areas have been replaced by managed landscapes, and as people who live in cities become further removed from wilder areas because of the growth of cities, we have repeatedly responded by trying to protect “the last wild places or species,” according to Schama. Perhaps the most important reason for this is that our concepts and views of nature are strongly based in our cultural traditions, which are passed on from generation to generation. This transfer takes place through the telling of stories and relating closely held beliefs, in the same manner as for other cultural traditions.

Stories and myths are important ways that our cultural heritage is passed

on, according to Schama. Over a period of several thousand years, tales of the forests became embodied in our fairy tales. Fairy tales compiled by the Grimm Brothers in Germany have become more “gentle” over time to be more suitable for children (Grimm and others 1997), but they reflect values we hold of our forests, from being places of magic to being revered as religious or nationalistic symbols. Modern fairy tales, such as stories about Robin Hood in England (Worldwide Robin Hood Society 2005), are very much alive in our culture. The Robin Hood story has evolved over time to its present form to be symbolic of our cultural views of government and “rightness.” We continue to adopt new fairy tales that incorporate our view of nature. For example, advertisements for the movie *Lord of the Rings* show scenes of pastoral beauty, the joy of gardening and agriculture, and the wealth of mythical creatures, from fairies and wizards to goblins.

CURRENT TRENDS IN NATIVE PLANT GARDENING

So what does this have to do with native plant gardening? Aspects of everyday life reinforce the notion that nature is an integral part of our culture. Both gardens and wilder areas are important for our well-being. The very names of our housing developments reveal the depths of our adoption of European myths. My own neighborhood in Beaverton, Oregon, is called “Royal Woodlands.” No royalty reside or hunt here, nor are there woods or forests. The street names—Elm Avenue, Pine Place, and Cherry Avenue—do not reflect the actual trees growing here. The Sunday, 28 November 2004 issue of the *Oregonian*, the major newspaper for the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area, lists hundreds of such names for housing developments and apartment complexes. They include Heathcliff (an image from Scotland or Ireland?), Cedar Terrace, Sunset

Oaks, Mountain Fir, and Oaks at Springbrook, names that clearly evoke images of the forest.

I believe that native plants are being incorporated into home landscapes because of our continued desire for nature. Native plant gardening, per se, is not new; in fact it is very old. For example, Hedrick (1950) lists many examples of people gardening with native plants, both in this country and abroad dating from the 1700s. Until the last 10 to 20 y, the emphasis in growing native plants consisted largely of merely substituting natives for other horticultural plants in existing landscapes. Many of the older books, such as Hedrick, provided information on native plant use in this traditional context. What is new is the way people are beginning to garden—attempting to recapture nature, often through attracting birds and butterflies or providing backyard wildlife habitats.

Statistics on the proliferation of Internet sites show that native plant World Wide Web sources are growing rapidly. This is true even if you consider the overall growth of websites as part of the equation. On 15 October 2001, a search of the World Wide Web for “native plants” yielded 186 000 responses (personal observation). On 23 October 2003, the number was 518 200. On 29 November 2004, the number was 1 400 000. Many of these websites promote native plants by referring to their value to wildlife. For example, a website for Chicago Wilderness (2004) promotes native plants to “provide shelter or food [to] deliver more benefits to you and to wildlife year after year. Native plants naturally adapt, providing shelter and food to native wildlife more consistently, even during drought or freezing conditions. You’ll find that planting native flowering species will provide an abundance of nectar.” A Department of Natural Resources website for Minnesota (2004) states, “Native plants are increasingly used for gardening, landscaping, and restoring and reclaiming native plant communities. They can



Photo by Linda McMahān

Figure 1. This scene on the campus of Oregon State University in Corvallis is an example of how gardeners try to create natural conditions that mimic nature.



Photo by Linda McMahān

Figure 2. At the Oregon Garden in Silverton, ornamental but functional bioswales using native plants help filter the water as part of a sewage treatment process.

provide natural beauty, cost-effective landscaping alternatives, environmental services, and habitat for wildlife.”

Further evidence for the increased interest in native plants is the changing practices of gardening in our communities, which is in turn reflected in our public gardens and other public spaces. The University of British Columbia Botanic Garden is just one public garden featuring a native plant garden. Informal new plantings at Oregon State University use fallen limbs and native species to suggest “natural” (Figure 1).

At the same time, the growth in restoration efforts is impressive. Soci-

also increasing. According to Schama (1995), both activities are increasing because of strongly held cultural traditions that have supported restoration efforts at recurring times throughout the history of Western culture.

Based on historical and cultural trends, I predict that native plant gardening and restoration will continue and expand as our access to nature decreases. One reason for this growth in use of native plants reflects our cultural urge to restore and recapture what is lost. As restoration itself continues, homeowners will take cues from these activities and begin to reproduce

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eties and companies specializing in restoration or in growing plants for restoration are proliferating. These include emphasis on bioswales, biofiltration, “natural” storm water management, and alternative treatments for sewage treatment. At the Oregon Garden in Silverton, native plants are used ornamentally in bioswales that help treat the sewage effluent from the city of Silverton (Figure 2). Nurseries specializing in native plants for restoration and for the public are more numerous and more readily found as they gain a larger presence on the World Wide Web.

CONCLUSIONS

Today, native plant gardening is not only growing in scope but also changing from a traditional approach of incorporating native plants into European-style gardening landscapes to a habitat or wildlife focus. Restoration activities are

them—most likely imperfectly but with a great deal of enthusiasm—in their own gardens.

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