

## **Natives: the “In” Word in the Gardening World<sup>©</sup>**

Rick Webb

Louisiana Growers, 63279 Lowery Road, Amite, Louisiana 70422, USA

Email: rick@lanativeplants.com

### **INTRODUCTION**

I was a Pre-Forestry major whose only formal plant materials courses were introductory Dendrology Horticulture classes. After working a summer at a wholesale nursery, my major was changed to Plant Science with a Bachelor of Science awarded in 1979. So Sylviculture, Soil Science, and Agronomy were as important in my college education as Horticulture.

This was followed by an 8 year “graduate program” with a field-grown and container nursery where I worked in propagation, production, sales, harvesting, and shipping of mainline woody trees and shrubs and groundcovers.

In 1988, after deciding it was time to start my own business, I opened my own nursery and worked with plants that were from my earlier education: trees and shrubs of native woodlands and a few exotics. As I learned more of the landscape uses of these natives, impetus was placed on visiting and studying the diverse habitats and plants of the area and making germplasm collections.

The focus of the nursery is geared to unique plants from Florida Parishes of eastern Louisiana, which entails a slice of the Gulf Coast plain from near-Piedmont conditions on the Upper Terrace through the flat savannahs of the Lower Terrace to the brackish marshes of the Gulf Coast along Lake Ponchartrain. All of this compressed into 30 miles, north to south.

### **WHAT ARE NATIVE SPECIES?**

Any talk on Natives must begin with the first question: Define Native?

- Being of the place or environment in which a person was born or a thing came into being.
- Of, pertaining to, or characteristic of the indigenous inhabitants of a place or country.

But when we talk about inhabitants of a place, movement of the species has to come in to discussion. So Einstein was correct: Everything is about Space and Time.

- If a plant originated on the Southeastern coast of Asia and was relocated to a similar area of the North America, is a native?
- If a plant was relocated 200 years ago, is it native?
- If a plant migrated with the Ice Age and is here now, is it a native?
- If a plant was moved out of its original range by Americans, is it a native?
- If a plant that is native to the Pacific Northwest of North America is planted in Central Park, New York City, is it still native?
- If a species is collected from the northern end of its range and moved to the southern end, is it a native? Are all the seedlings of a given individual that is indigenous to an area optimal, or would a given seed do better in another ecological range – and if so, is it a native?
- If a given individual is collected from a wet bay gall in the pinewoods and is moved 100 yards up slope to a mesic hillside, is it a native? Or is it the same old question: Nurture verses Nature?

### **DESIGNING LANDSCAPES**

So when I give presentations to gardeners and landscapers, it has been my goal to talk about natural forms and species in the design and intent of our landscapes, rather than native verses non-native.

Gardeners are advised to follow a few guidelines:

- Nature’s designs are irregular, not random.
- Plants in nature evolve to fill niches. Identify those and fill them appropriately.

- Never design a planting as an even number or a straight line or a pure arc.
- Think about how the native fauna, including humans, use the landscape and how it can change over time.
- Think about how the garden will evolve over time.
- Think of the garden, as a forest, in layers.
- Study your site and surrounding similar stable sites and their species.
- Ask yourself or your clients if the five “F’s” of seasonality are important: flowers, form, foragers, fruit, fragrance, and fall color.
- Create woodlands and thickets and get rid of the “manicured lawn look” except for small areas that mimics water.
- Mulch, mulch, mulch.
- Remember: This is not rocket science; it is quite simple.

### **IMPORTANCE OF NATIVE PLANTS IN NATURAL DESIGNED AND CONSTRUCTED SPACES**

So why are native plants in natural designed and constructed spaces important? In part, it helps mitigate the dramatic changes of the last two centuries to our environment. Other benefits include:

- To (re)create habitat for native flora and fauna and co-habitant humans.
- To remind us of our sense of place.
- To manage stormwater.
- To minimize maintenance costs.
- To protect our properties.
- To create a business niche from a national trend.
- To add value to our real estate.
- To beautify our spaces.

### **PROPAGATION OF NATIVES**

Now since this is a meeting of propagators, propagation is essential. The simple answer is that there is a commonality of propagation methods used with other non-native, commercial plants. Whether by seed, cuttings, division, or grafting — there are specific propagation systems for each species.

There are two exceptions that are specific to native plants and designed native landscapes:

- Some clients want a truly diverse garden and will accept only seedling propagated plants. Hence, it is essential that these plants can be propagated by seed. They also use a confusing term to describe clonal selections of native plants: “nativar” — defined as a cultivar or hybrid derived from a native plant; in this way, one can define the native range and describe a cultivar or hybrid that originated from that range a nativar, i.e., an ecotype. Other clients want some predictability when site conditions allow use of cultivated cultivars.
- Location, Location, Location. To many this is second in importance only to the species selected for a garden. To this group the very definition of a weed [an undesirable plant that grows and reproduces invasively outside its native habitat] is expanded to also include incorrectly placing a native in the landscape.

### **SELECTIONS OF LOCAL NATIVES**

Here are a few selections of our local natives:

#### ***Clethra***

We made trips into *Clethra* habitat in Washington and St. Tammany parishes and took cuttings from individual and mixed source plants. I have been disappointed in its ability to establish successfully. Several stock plants are in the ground around our office and individual plants were sent to the U.S.D.A. in Tennessee. We have not named any cultivars.

### ***Cyrilla***

Where we find populations of *Cyrilla racemiflora* on the lower terrace, we noticed its massing habit in wet habitats and the diversity of form. So it is easy to find forms that vary from small foliage shrubby forms, to small trees with large foliage, to layered horizontal forms. Colors range from orange-red fall color to evergreen foliage. I have yet to see any unique flower color other than typically found with the species. We have established five numbered selections.

### ***Ilex***

We are interested in *Ilex vomitoria*. One yellow-gold fruited form was selected and named. *I. vomitoria* 'Chesborough', which is an open, small foliage, large shrub / small tree form. Another form has red fruits with a full round habit and normal foliage is *I. vomitoria* 'Lowery Road'. We also have also selected a tight semi-dwarf male with small foliage that will be named 'El Chico'.

### ***Lyonia***

*Lyonia lucida* is common in wet pine flats just south of us. We have two named selections: *L. lucida* 'Lorraine' which grows to 2.1 m (7 ft.) with large glossy foliage with white spring flowers, and *L. lucida* 'Hoover Road' which is a mid-size selection that is deep pink in bud and then pale pink. It is nearly white at anthesis. Two others were selected and numbered.

### ***Viburnum***

There is difficulty with the taxonomy of *Viburnum*. In our nursery, we work with two groups: Arrowwood viburnum (*V. dentatum*) and witherod (*V. cassinoides*). From the immediate north shore of Lake Ponchartrain on the lower terrace and up to wet flats in on the upper terrace are populations with small foliage and flower clusters and very shrubby habit. This has been called *V. ashei* in older texts and is now lumped into *V. recognitum* by the Plants Database. Several selections are:

**1. *Viburnum dentatum* 'Osceola'**. It was the first named cultivar in this Florida Parishes place name series, which I found along a Tangipahoa roadside southeast of Husser, Louisiana. It was the first small foliage arrowwood I had noticed. The red-brown wood color of the new growth is an indicator of the plant's outstanding red fall color. Flowers are great and fruits and thick branching makes it fine bird habitat. The habit is a large round arching shrub to 3 m (10 ft.) tall and 3.7 m (12 ft.) wide with very nice fall color.

**2. *Viburnum* 'Lee's Landing'**. Its small foliage and size is its namesake, with the smallest foliage [1.9 cm (0.75 in.) wide by 3.8 cm (1.5 in.) length] named form that we have. It has a tight round growth habit that is much smaller in size than the typical species. It has decent flowering and fruit, but with a yellow fall color. The selection was found just 1 mile north of the Tupelo/Cypress swamp along the lake and the Tangipahoa River in poorly drained Flatwoods near Lee's Landing, Louisiana.

**3. *Viburnum* 'Chemekete'**. This was wild collected from a flat pinewoods 2 miles northeast of Robert, Louisiana. 'Chemekete' comes from Native American that describes the geographic features of the area. It is appropriately named and one of the most arrowwood-like forms that I have found. This viburnum has upright straight growth from the crown that arch after 1.8 m (6 ft.) to half as wide as a tall shrub. It has good flowering in mid-May, summer fruit set and pale reddish, orange, purple fall color. It has a narrow habit for the species.

**4. *Viburnum* 'Greensburg'**. It is a favorite of mine. A combination of the attributes of 'Osceola' include its red, nearly burgundy fall color, rounded habit, small foliage, and a stature smaller than 'Lee's Landing' – all of what makes it unique. It will grow to 1.8-2.4 m (6-8 ft.) after 10 years.

**5. *Viburnum* 'Abita Flatwoods'**. The plant was found between Pearl River, Louisiana and Abita Springs, Louisiana along Highway 36 in wet pond cypress - longleaf pine habitat. It is a small foliage form with dark red twigs, rounded habit but less striking fall

color makes it a good shrub.

**6. *Viburnum* ‘Uneedus’.** It was found near Uneedus, Louisiana, and has very linear foliage. Flowers are typical of the species, but it sets loads of fruit and maybe self-fertile. Its mature size and habit have not been determined. The mother plant was growing in a crowded site with poor conditions so we must get them stabilized and field-trialed.

**7.** The other arrowwood type in my woods is what we have just around us on upland mesic understory sites. This type has large 0.9-1.2 m (3-4 ft.) coarse textures foliage and large flowers clusters. Another difference is its limit to commercially produce as it has few apical growth points to make cuttings of and these root in lower percentages. I have managed to root a few each year, but have been given most away. The last couple of plants have been maintained as propagation stock, but multiplication is slow.

**8. *Viburnum* ‘Ben’s Creek’.** It was found between Bogalusa and Franklinton, Louisiana, and its full dense habit was the attraction. Turns out that might have been a function of it being out in the open on a young loblolly pine plantation as it has resumed the expected more-open, tree-like habit of the species when planted in bright understory. It has a rich red fall color, good flowers, fruit, fall foliage, fabulous form, and a good bird attractor.

**9. *Viburnum* ‘Squirrel Creek’.** This is the most local selection in my collection. It was found in the back woods of my property and I moved it up to anchor the corner of my carport. It has a loose upright large shrub to small tree. I use it as the perfect native selection.

**10. Witherod (*V. cassinoides*) and *V. nudum*.** Witherod (*V. cassinoides*) and *V. nudum* are scattered in our area in wet flats. They have green glossy foliage and a small tree habit with the waxy stems.

**11. *Viburnum* ‘Chappapeela’.** It was found growing at the water line of an upland creek east of Amite, Louisiana. While deciduous with rich red internal fall color, it is nearly evergreen. It is an upright large shrub/small tree.

## SUMMARY

- 1) Although they do not consider themselves as “native plants” people, the vast majority of the members of the nursery/landscape industry propagate, grow, sell, install, and maintain native and non-native plants.
- 2) Are we willing to make the changes to the nursery industry necessary to promote native plants in naturalized gardens, to encourage regionalization matched with local production demand to raise awareness of the importance of viewing our spaces as shared eco-systems or to address the functional purposes of our landscapes not just the ornamental value?
- 3) Do we expect the educational and research components of our industry to pursue these same goals?
- 4) As growers are we willing to expand diversity in our production lines and pot-up a handful of seedlings or cuttings, or do we focus on the latest patented / trademarked gem and produce thousands of them to make a living?
- 5) And if root systems are naturally wide and shallow, why do we not produce plants in similar-shaped containers, rather than traditional tall, upright containers?
- 6) Are we as an industry and as individuals willing to take the long road with the hills of change?

From the “Address on the Nation’s Space Effort” by John F. Kennedy delivered at Rice University in Houston, Texas on September 12, 1962.

“...and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, ...”

Remember — Diversity Rules!