

# Increasing diversity and availability of native woody plants in the nursery industry<sup>©</sup>

B. Hendricks<sup>a</sup>

Klyn Nurseries Inc., 3322 S Ridge Rd, Perry, Ohio 44081, USA.

## NATIVE PLANTS

There is a misconception that native plants, in general, are not that ornamental based on what's observed in the wild. There is some truth to this but through cultivation, many can become excellent landscape plants. In fact the nursery industry embraces many native plants that under standard nursery practices become excellent ornamentals. Good examples include many mainstream landscape plants. Trees such as *Acer saccharum*, *Amelanchier laevis*, *Asimina triloba*, *Cercis canadensis*, *Cornus florida*, *Fagus grandifolia*, *Nyssa sylvatica* as well as many species of *Quercus*. Shrubs including *Aronia*, *Clethra alnifolia*, *Cornus sericea*, *Diervilla lonicera* and *Ilex verticillata* are widely available.

Another problem is how we define native. It can be defined in different ways depending on how they will be used.

To the purest and those that are working with natural areas a native plant is one that occurs in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat without human intervention. It is commonly accepted that the flora present at the time Europeans arrived as the species native to the eastern United States.

A more liberal approach may be taken when dealing with the public. It is often necessary to look beyond the local natives to create exciting landscapes and it is commonly accepted to look at natives east of the Mississippi or Midwest natives in our area.

A common fallacy is that natives will outperform introduced plants. This may not necessarily be true. The old adage of "right plant, right place" must still be followed and understanding of the conditions in which a plant grows is very important.

Nativars, love them or hate them, are a growing opportunity for nurserymen to meet the native people part way. There is a debate raging whether "nativars" have the same ecosystem services as the true native species. Many nativars are actually selections made from native species that have improved traits and not hybrid plants. Are they as beneficial as native species to wildlife? The answer is unclear without further research. The upside is that they awaken an interest and awareness in native plants to the general public.

Often when people refer to natives they are focused on herbaceous plants whether they are to be used in a prairie planting or in a pollinator garden. Woody plants are often overlooked. With a little research a nurseryman or landscape designer may find that they are actually using more natives and cultivars of natives than they realize.

Understanding the environment in which plants will be grown can open multiple opportunities to choose good native species and cultivars. Promoting these plants for their environmental value is an overlooked sales opportunity for many.

Another opportunity is to look at pollinator friendly plants. In reality pollinators probably visit as many nonnative plants and nativars as pure native species for their nectar. This is only part of the story. These pollinators, especially butterflies need plants on which to rear their young. *Lindera benzoin* is host to the spicebush swallowtail and *A. triloba* provides the food source for the zebra swallowtail. Other woody plants that can attract butterflies include trees such as *Populus* spp., *Ptelea trifoliata*, *Ulmus* spp., *Sassafras*, *Magnolia virginiana*, and *Salix* spp. Vines such as *Passiflora edulis* (syn. *P. incarnate*) and *Aristolochia* are also host plants.

## WHEN GOOD PLANTS GO BAD

On the flip side we must also be aware that some of the plants that have been staples

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<sup>a</sup>E-mail: bhendricks@klynnurseries.com

in the nursery industry have become bad performers. Plants are regional and invasiveness of a species is rarely national. It is imperative that as an industry we take a proactive approach and get involved in the invasive issue. Play a part in working with the natural areas people to understand the ramifications of invasiveness as it affects us all. Be prepared to bring facts not emotion to the table when discussing these plants. It is a fact that *Lonicera maackii* is invasive, especially in southern Ohio. Recently the invasiveness of ornamental pear has been observed in multiple areas. We may not like these facts, but we must face the reality that some plants will have to go out of or be limited in production. Sound science such as the rating system used in Ohio can help better understand which plants have the potential for invasiveness.

#### **SUMMARY**

Growing native plants is an opportunity to be environmentally friendly while developing a physically sound marketing program that can be a great sales opportunity.