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Native toads



by MARIA ZAMPINI

...when we're talking sustainability and greening, it confounds me when purists won't even consider cultivars of natives to be a viable option.

Maria Zampini is president of Lake County New Plants LLC, Madison, Ohio. She co-founded the company with her father, Jim Zampini. Their focus is sales and marketing of LCN Selections along with research and development of new plant introductions. She can be reached at maria.zampini@yahoo.com.

One of my favorite sayings is, "Eat the toad first thing in the morning." To me it means if you face a difficult or unpleasant task, just get it done and over with. Well, I have to admit that there is one topic for my column I've been avoiding. That is, until now. Today I tackle what I sometimes perceive as a toad: the issue of native plants.

If there's one topic in our green world that, in my opinion, falls into a somewhat muddy, gray area, it's natives. Because I'm an obsessive, compulsive Virgo, I crave things to be in a neat and orderly fashion. I prefer everything to be clear-cut and fall into black or white scenarios. Well, we don't always get what we want in life, do we? On some levels, natives leave me downright perplexed.

I remember when perennials first became hot. People wondered aloud when the "trend" would go downhill. However, like perennials, I don't think natives are a trend. In fact, I think they are part of an entire cultural shift that is occurring across America, one that goes hand-in-hand with greening and sustainability.

OK, so I get the whole theory behind why natives are supposed to be better. I'm not sure I totally agree with it, but I understand the concept. If you plant something that grew or grows naturally in your area, it should—theoretically—perform better.

While I can support the native philosophy, I do have major reservations about promoting and limiting yourself to using only natives in the landscape. I think that nothing in life is ever simple, nor cut-and-dry, and the same holds true for natives. Let me explain further.

First, if I wanted to plant a dogwood in northeast Ohio, I'm told I should choose the native Florida dogwood. But I can honestly ask, "Why would I ever choose it over a non-native *Kousa chinensis*?" While I love Floridas, in my opinion, they are prone to anthracnose and are not as hardy. To me, *Kousa chinensis* is a good example of an adapted native that not only thrives but outperforms its native counterpart. For

my geographic area, in this particular instance, I believe the nonnative is a better choice than the native.

Second, when we're talking sustainability and greening, it confounds me when purists won't even consider cultivars of natives to be a viable option. Hmm ... so, on one hand we could plant a native that, while a nice plant, grows wild and out of control—meaning it will require maintenance and trimming, or needs spraying to keep its leaves. On the other hand, we could choose a cultivar, either bred or selected from a native, which has better growth habit, is more disease-resistant so it takes less spraying and trimming, etc., etc., etc. But we should choose or only be allowed to plant the native? Imagine, please, the look of confusion on my face while I shake my head discouragingly. What if a cultivar naturally occurred in Mother Nature? What if someone noticed what a gem she came out with? Yet we should use the older, worse-performing species because ... why?

This past September I attended the Garden Writers Association Annual Symposium in Dallas. One of the most interesting presentations I attended was by my good friend and wanna-be brother, Clint Albin, and Suzi McCoy of The Garden Media Group. They spoke on "From Mega Trends to Gardening Trends"—great talk!

One of the trends they covered was container gardening and annuals. They discussed the fantastic annuals that are drought-tolerant, dwarf, have increased disease and insect resistance and other, "better" traits. Although it may be dim sometimes, my light bulb goes off. As someone who does R&D on woody plants, for a moment I thought, "What the heck?" Isn't this some type of contradiction? All these so-called "better" traits are OK for annuals, but when it comes to woodies people don't want "nurseryfied" plants? I find it really interesting that, on one hand, the gardening public is craving the new and improved, but on the other hand, you have some people demanding we use only natives and no cultivars.

Recently when doing some research for an article on natives, I found that what is native in Ohio isn't exactly the same as the states surrounding me. I guess there is also a difference on how far back a plant had to be growing in a region for it to really be considered "native." I guess just like the baseball record books, we'll have asterisks denoting this, that and the other, and you'll have to read the fine print to see how native is defined.

When it comes to natives, I do appreciate how they can present a great marketing opportunity in today's business world. And I see more and more nurseries jumping on that bandwagon. Heck, I am too! I often see where nurseries note on their availability list or catalog which plants are native. But native according to whom?

We're lucky that in Ohio we have someone like Mark Gilson of Gilson Gardens in Perry who is willing to get involved and represent our industry. Last summer, Mark organized a tour of local nurseries for the Lake Erie Allegheny Partnership for Biodiversity (LEAP) Native Plant Promotion Committee. Afterward, he hosted a dinner for attendees and nurseries. It was a great group, in a relaxing setting, with a few beers and wine tossed in for good measure. We found we're all working toward the same goal in life; we've just chosen different paths. It was an eye-opener for all and definitely worth taking the time to open the communication channels.

So, I guess I'm hoping that the native issue doesn't follow the same line as we see in politics; one where there is no dialogue but an attitude of "I'm right; you're wrong." If enough of us eat the toad first thing in the morning and engage in reasonable discussion, I think we'll find appropriate room for natives and nonnatives alike.

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