Add Some Native Diversity

By: Douglas Owens-Pike

Is your design practice focused on showy gardens? That is what most clients ask for and what the industry teaches us we should be doing. This article offers some tips on how to add native diversity and keep your designs gorgeous and full of blooms as we offer our clients ideas for nurturing other creatures.

Why is diversity important? We are facing an ecological crisis across our globe. There are three primary, interrelated issues. Human development is wiping out former natural vegetation. Climate change affects what plants will survive with higher temperatures and perhaps less water. Also, some introduced species are out-competing natives in the few natural stands remaining. Diversity creates our atmosphere, keeps it balanced and keeps us alive. Many creatures are host specific to individual plant species for food, rearing their young and resting. Introduced plants are not used by native pollinators.

Bringing Nature Home by Douglas Tallamy is an excellent book describing how non-native plants in our landscape disrupt the food chain. Diversity of plants and insects creates a circle of life, the ecosystem, that gives us the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat. When we lose the diversity, we lose the entire food chain. Diverse plantings of natives offer our clients ideas for nurturing other creatures.

Placing the native plants that are available (here in the upper Midwest we have 300+) in these thirty-six cells, we find that the pattern is a classic bell curve centered on savanna rain gardens with approximately 90 species.

DEFINITION of RAINGARDEN: Normally dry, but occasionally flooded with stormwater runoff. It is not a pond or marsh, and it’s designed so that water filters into the soil within two days.

DEFINITION of SAVANNA: A woodland edge, about one-half day of direct sun, from four to eight hours, and a tree canopy covering up to 50 percent of the site. If you examine either side of the savanna each has close to 40 species of perennials. The other area, exposed to full sun, will be dry with over 30 perennials.

Looking over all 36 cells, there are excellent plants to choose from under any condition, and many species can be used in a variety of habitats.

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If you learn six native plants that work best in the six most common habitats you design, you will only need to add 36 new plants to your plant palette. For our matrix, we are further dividing it into height, time and color of bloom. While each native plant has its own attributes for inclusion, if you know only a couple dozen that are available and work well in your region, you will be well on your way to becoming a better steward of the diversity of life that will sustain us through this period of ecological upheaval.

Start by going to local nurseries that specialize in native plants. Ask them for their top favorites. Each of these is an important habitat refuge for the creatures that depend on it for their food or shelter.

In the past, restoration ecology has focused on harvesting seeds locally to propagate the plants best adapted to your soil and climate conditions. Climate change now forces us to consider nurseries that are perhaps 200 miles south, in addition to those from our immediate area. Studies indicate that because native habitat is now so scarce, people need to move seed north or to higher elevations in order to handle the changing conditions. As professional landscape designers, this is an important ecological service that we can advertise to attract new clients.

I welcome your feedback on these suggestions and would love to hear what challenges and successes you are finding in your home territory as you begin to use native plants in landscape design. Please e-mail me any feedback you may have at douglas@energyscapes.com.

Presidential Travel

By: Judy Nauseef, APLD

The board of directors wisely budgets for travel costs so that the president may attend the American Nursery and Landscape Association Management Clinic and visit a chapter. I took advantage of the opportunity to do both this past winter.

I had not attended the ANLA Management Clinic since I was a student 20 years ago. I was much better prepared this time to take advantage of the sessions and to meet other ANLA members. I had great fun meeting people because my opening line was always the same and was a great ice breaker: “My name is Judy Nauseef and I am president of the Association of Professional Landscape Designers.” Most had not heard of us and were eager to learn about APLD. I met landscape designers, landscape architects, contractors, garden center owners, nursery owners, publishers, vendors, teachers, students and prospective sponsors. The sessions were excellent, ranging from ways to increase referrals to incorporating native plants into your designs. I was happy to see APLD member and program chair Danilo Maffei, APLD, and past ANLA president Joanne Kosteczy, APLD, at the clinic. I also saw colleagues from Iowa. I met with ANLA staff to talk about future collaboration with APLD.

I received an invitation from Maureen Decombe, president of the California chapter, to visit the chapter during the San Francisco Flower and Garden Show. That was an invitation hard to resist, although it turned out that the weather was not much warmer than at home. However, the yards were full of flowering plants, including the beautiful garden of Janet Bell, APLD, who graciously put me up. Maureen had planned the entire time. I judged the show with Janet and Deanna Glory, APLD and chose a garden for an APLD award. An APLD member from California, Pamela Simonds, APLD, had a beautiful show garden and I enjoyed visiting with her. APLD members built an amazing booth where I worked and met members. I saw old friends, met members I had only met by phone or email, and met members for the first time. It is a vibrant chapter with members who are determined to elevate the profession of landscape design in the minds of the public and the rest of the green industry. Maureen planned dinners where I met and spoke with more members to learn about their businesses and also to find out how APLD can better serve them. Maureen also made it possible for me to meet with my landscape design instructor who now teaches at a community college in California. I was able to attend a lively meeting of the San Francisco District. It was truly a wonderful visit and I feel I now have so many more APLD friends to see at our conferences.