

The easy part of green

Locally grown native plants in your landscape

Warren Wilson College. Samsel Architects photo

By **BILL JONES**
Every new home, commercial and residential development – or for that matter any new construction project – requires a building permit. They also require a landscaping plan.

In reviewing The Sustainable Sites Initiative developed by the A.S.L.A., The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and the United States Botanical Garden, planting and preserving native plants can and will pay in many ways. The U.S. Green Building Council is a major stakeholder and has committed to

incorporating these guidelines and standards into the LEED Green Building Rating Systems. Even if you are not looking towards LEED Standards, locally grown native plants are more “green” than exotics that “are not from around here.”

So, how do native plants fit into sustainability, green building, and these developing standards and guidelines?

By first understanding why using native plants in landscaping is an environmentally and economically sound practice, it’s then easy to see how they readily fit into sus-

tainable and green building concepts and implementation. A landscape plan that embraces native plant material has many advantages before the discussion of standards and initiatives comes into play.

There are four major points to remember, and we often refer to these as selling points in a landscaping presentation:

■ Native plants are environmentally friendly. They require less maintenance and are cost effective in the landscape. In other words, they require little to no pesticides and fer-

tilizer treatments and will not require irrigation for their survival. This can be a very substantial cost savings for your clients in the long run. It can be especially important for clients who have vacation homes.

■ Native plants are hardy. They have adapted and evolved through the ages to local soil types and climate therefore withstanding winter cold and dieback as well as drought conditions. Consequently, they have a better survival rate.

■ Native plants promote biodiversity, provide food and shelter for native wildlife, and restores regional



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landscapes. It is vitally important for birds. Most birds species feed their young insects, insects only thrive on native plants. The removal of native plants from the landscape can be seen as a major cause of reduced bird numbers and diversity. A native landscape can blend effortlessly with the surrounding natural landscape.

■ Native plants prevent future exotic and invasive plant introductions. Although many exotic, or non-native, plants are not invasive, some are. Invasive exotic plant material escapes, naturalizes, spreads, and replaces the native plant communities. These exotics can be vectors of disease and insects. Kudzu, privet, and oriental bittersweet are examples of exotics gone awry in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

The other aspect mentioned is buying locally grown plant material. Horticulture studies prove that plants raised from local stock (progeny) in the same climatic conditions where they are planted will undoubtedly survive better.

So, how does locally grown fit into this?

There are some distinct advantages of buying plant material from your local growers. In buying from local nurserymen, plant survivability is enhanced, you are supporting local families and businesses, and helping to save energy and prevent pollution. The Asheville Chamber of Commerce reported that an extra 35 cents of every dollar spent on locally sourced products (not just plants) stays local. Plus, who is best to answer your questions about plants than the growers themselves?

And how does buying locally grown plants increase their ability to survive?

Common sense tells us that a plant grown in the same climatic conditions such as rainfall, winter and summer temperatures, and elevation as the locale in which it will be planted will survive better. Do you really think a plant grown in Alabama, Florida or Eastern North Carolina with little (or no) winter will do better in Western North Carolina? That doesn't even consider the plants progeny, in other words where did the seed or original cuttings come from. It certainly makes sense, especially when the plants you sell or install need to have every advantage you can give them to survive, to buy local material when possible.

We all can agree that buying local produce from the farmers market help insure a strong community, preserves family farmland, and prevents urban sprawl. Nurseries are the same. As the first environmentalists, farmers and nurserymen depend on the vitality of their land in insure their future.

How does buying local save energy?

Well, in the shipping of course. What is the energy cost of shipping plants from Oregon, Florida or Eastern North Carolina? And with the



Derek Olson photo

prospect of global warming, what about the carbon input into the atmosphere. Buying local plants may decrease overall fuel demand and lower your fuel costs.

The bottom line – straight from the nursery and into the ground is the best bet.

“What does sustainability mean to you?” That was the question posed to me once by Alison Arnold, former Director of Horticulture at the N.C. Arboretum. At that time, I hadn't thought about it and certainly had no quick answer. Now I say that sustainability, as far as landscaping is concerned, means a landscape of native plants that naturally enhances and fits its surrounding ecosystem. Like an old cabin in the woods, a man put it there, but it certainly seems like it belongs.

Bill Jones is founder and president of Carolina Native Nursery located in Burnsville. Carolina Native grows over 100 species of native shrubs and provides consulting as well as native landscape design and installation services. For more information, click on www.carolinanativenursery.com or info@carolinativenursery.com.

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