

smaller is BETTER

by Joseph A. Cascio



Julia Damon Hanway

Oh, how I love to see a finished or mature landscape that looks like the installation was made ten years ago and had been maintained ever since! Trouble is, you usually have to acquire the plants first and design with them in mind; you may need to invest more money unless you aim at a finished look achieved with hordes of small plants; you definitely have to maintain larger plants carefully for the first year, or two seasons.

Most would agree that this opportunity is a rare one for a designer, and perhaps too contingent upon good maintenance for its success. Mature plant materials do not make quick recoveries or become adapted to a new environment easily.

When I first began researching south Florida natives, Hugh and Priscilla Forthman told me that two of the trees of the same size in their demonstration gardens were not the same age or investment, two years after planting. One tree had been carefully moved up year after year from one container to another until it had essentially been halted in a 15 or 20 gallon tub, because he had no larger tub. He had planted it along with a one-gallon and a three-gallon tree in the same plant bed, two years before. They had all received the same care in planting and maintenance and were now essentially equal in size with more vigor displayed by the younger specimens; therefore the large container tree was a poor investment compared with the trees from the smaller containers.

When a tree is planted in a 15 gallon or larger container, it is pampered along perhaps for several years there. It has lived under the strict nursery regimen for three to five years of regular humidity and fertilization, control of competition and predators.

Then, we plunge the plant into a denser soil of a different temperature, chemical and moisture content,

usually damaging the roots in the process (which, in the case of rootbound balls, could be an advantage). It mopes along, complaining about this and that, missing the first season of growth perhaps. The smaller plants are usually in a more vigorous growth and hit the ground running, adding at least an inch of caliper per year, often more, after planting in the ground.

If they are then both dug up, one finds a far broader, deeper root system on the younger plant, far better suited to erosion control, slope stabilization, dune stabilization, habitat competition, and self-reliance without irrigation and/or fertilization.

When designing large scale landscapes such as restoration work or replacing a habitat with elements of plant succession, one can make great use of seedlings, liners, and rooted cuttings. The individual plant investment drops dramatically in spite of losses due to browsing and animal disturbance; and in four or five seasons a young forest has evolved.

Priscilla offered a dramatic demonstration of this. At the edge of their container production area, they had

allowed some seedlings to grow where they fell from a 15 gallon stock plant. In only two or three years those seedlings had eclipsed their container-bound parent, whose cost was 100 times the seedling cost.

With that in mind, here are some recommendations:

1. Whenever possible, design far enough ahead to have plants grown on consignment to your specific project specifications and construction schedule.
2. Design to abide by natural laws and natural maintenance.
3. Take delivery of stock as scheduled, and install wherever possible without delay.
4. Provide generous maintenance and adequate mulch for the very limited time required.
5. Take full credit for nature's handiwork by providing the desired planting in a vigorous state at a very reduced client investment.

Smaller is better for restoration and low maintenance—and repeat business.



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