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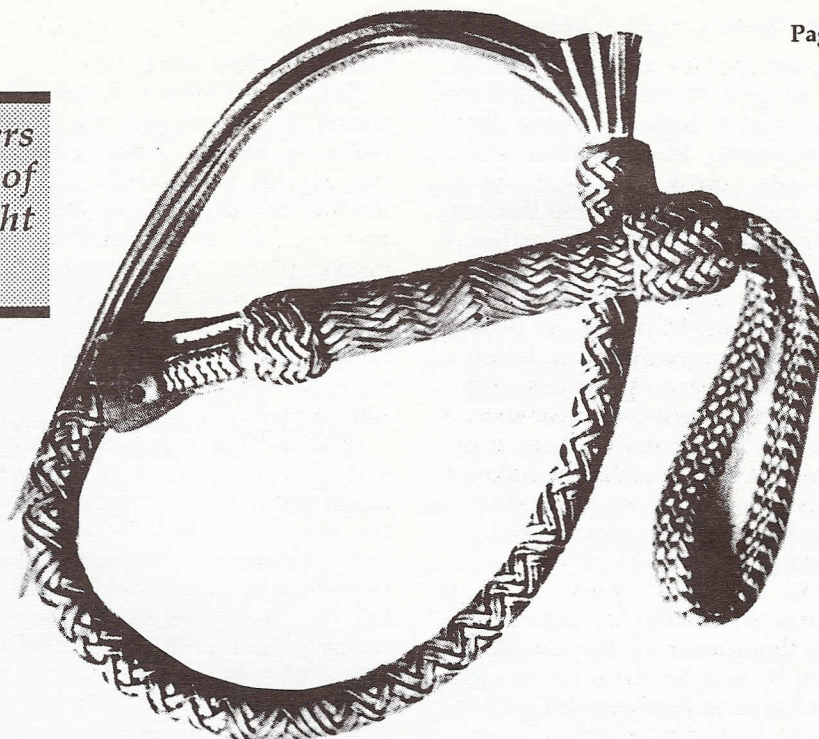
Anti-humanist. Xenophobic.

These words are used to describe advocates of native plant gardening in an article entitled "Against Nativism" by Michael Pollan in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Pollan, who claims that natural gardening was advocated by Nazi Germany, declared that the "natural garden" movement has "all but seized control of official garden taste in this country."

Michael Dirr, Professor of Horticulture at the University of Georgia, wrote that "friendships are solidified and shattered over native plants." He states that "the word *native* is elevated to a lofty and noble ideal that cannot be challenged or discussed by the politically incorrect." Gary Koller, horticulturist at Arnold Arboretum, in an article called "Native Dictates", ends up with some good reasons for using native plants, but starts out by claiming that environmentalists want to suppress all non-native plants, even vegetables and fruit trees.

Native landscaping — as described by its critics — can be summarized as follows:

- Native plant advocates would, on the basis of emotion and with no scientific evidence, ban all non-native plants from cultivation.
- Vegetable gardeners would be restricted to corn and squash.
- Benign European weeds such as cornflower and buttercup would be forbidden in naturalized meadows in northeastern United States.
- Landscapers would be allowed to plant only native species, which are notoriously finicky, subject to disease and predation, and difficult to mass produce. The American elm, American chestnut, and the Panhandle endemic *Torreya taxifolia* are cited as examples of disease-prone native species.
- Native plants are non-adapted to harsh polluted urban conditions or small suburban homesites. These plants would be foisted on the public, who rejects them as weeds and wouldn't use them if they



weren't forced to by fanatic environmentalist native gardeners.

- Anyway, nobody can define native plants, since plant communities have migrated over geologic time, some plants have been brought in by Native Americans, and there are no records to tell us what was here before humans.

The critics usually end with a virtuous plea for tolerance and diversity and a declaration that landscapers should be able to go to the ends of the earth to find exactly the right plant for the right place.

I don't have to point out to regular readers of *The Palmetto* that native landscaping is practical, not ideological. Wild plants existed for thousands of years in their native habitats, even though nobody was around to plant, irrigate, spray, or fertilize them. Their use is consistent with public policies to protect the environment and to preserve native wildlife. A retrofitted native landscape installation at one of Sarasota County's government complexes is saving \$700 a month in irrigation costs alone. This isn't emotion; this is tax money saved.

The public has every right to be concerned about foreign introductions that become invasive pests costing thousands of dollars to control. Australian pine, Brazilian pepper, and melaleuca were all first introduced as landscape plants. now Florida law prohibits planting these species.

I don't know any native plant advocate who opposes planting fruit trees or vegetables or that doesn't

Backlash to the Native Plant Movement

by Robin L. Hart

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have a soft spot for some non-natives. I have succulent species in one corner of my garden because I love their bizarre forms. Many native plant enthusiasts grow the non-native pentas and scarlet milkweed because of their ability to attract butterflies. I have not seen disease in native plants that are on sites resembling their natural habitats. Of course, all plants, native and non-native, can become victims of disease epidemics, especially if they grow in near-mono-cultures or if non-native disease organisms are introduced). The coconut palm is an example of a non-native tree that was nearly wiped out by a contagious disease.

Now, before you native landscapers become too intoxicated by the thought of all the power attributed to you by these critics, let's look at the facts. Native plant gardeners are more likely to be hauled into court, fined by homeowners' associations, and shunned by neighbors than they are to be dictating what goes into their neighbor's gardens. Although interest in native gardening is increasing dramatically, the percentage of native landscaping in any residential or commercial development is very low, despite the supposed control of official garden taste

by native plant advocates.

Still, when there is a backlash to a movement, it indicates that the movement is having some effect. The mainstream horticultural industry is leading the backlash in response to new regulations that favor the use of native plants in landscaping. The regulations vary from urging native plant use to requiring government, and, in some cases, private development to use a specific percentage of native plants.

The Hillsborough County commissioners were considering a new landscape ordinance that would mandate the use of 50% to 90% native plants in landscaping. Brightman Logan, president of the Association of Florida Native Nurseries, wrote a supportive letter to the commissioners. Roy Davis, president of the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau spoke to the commissioners in opposition of the ordinance. The excerpts cited below demonstrate the tone of his remarks:

"Here in my hand I have a letter signed by Brightman Logan... I wish to state to you that I have not yet read Brightman's letter... I know plants...I know landscaping...I can tell you that we were responsible for getting the name of

the Ornamental Horticulture Department of the University of Florida changed to the Environmental Horticulture Department..."

"I say to the Native Plant Industry today, *shame on you*. What a thoughtless thing to do. You guys appear to be trying to enrich yourselves at the expense of production nurserymen... Let's look at *Myrica cerifera* (wax myrtle): we find we must spray insecticide or fungicide on wax myrtle once each week... The more government's rules force us to grow wax myrtle, the more insecticides we will be introducing into the environment... If you have a native shrub which will be well enough adapted to man's created environment to compete for our consumer's attention, then show it to us and we will respond... The shame of it is to tell us that we must produce shrubs which are unacceptable to the public. Shame on you, Native Plant Industry."

Brightman Logan replied by letter that the 90% native mandate might be too much, but reminded the commission about the overall issues involved in native plant landscaping: water conservation and water quality, exotic invasions, low maintenance and sus-

tainability, and preservation of Florida's wildlife and plant heritage.

An April 26, 1994, memorandum signed by President Clinton, entitled "Environmentally and Economically Beneficial Practices on Federal Landscaped Grounds", brought a strong reaction from the horticultural industry. The memorandum promotes using regionally native plants and employing landscaping practices and technologies that conserve water and prevent pollution.

The memorandum directed that for federal grounds, federal projects, and federally funded projects, agen-

use of natives and non-natives. The Tampa Bay Wholesale Growers urged reconsideration of the executive memorandum because of "serious economic impact on both federal and home landscape markets."

Why is the horticultural industry reacting so strongly to the promotion of native plants? They claim that their position is "the right plant in the right place." Since nobody would argue with the notion that the landscaping plants that are selected should be adapted to site conditions, I asked some members of the Associ-

sonally did not advocate government mandates to private property owners to use native plants, although he thought that it was acceptable to require publicly owned facilities to use native landscaping.

Other native plant advocates also may differ about the extent to which native landscaping should be required by law. I would oppose regulating, either by public law or deed restrictions, what homeowners can plant in their backyards, with the exception of restrictions on use of invasive exotics. Instead, I would favor restrictions on irrigation, fertilizers, and pesticide use to protect ground and surface water and wildlife.

What must be addressed in responding to the "backlash" is not honest differences about policy, but the vast amount of misinformation that is being distributed by some leaders and academicians of the horticultural industry. The American Association of Nurserymen states that they are getting their perspective out to the news media, garden communicators, decision-makers, state/regional nursery associations, and, ultimately, the buying public. Native landscaping advocates must distribute information to these same groups and also to the mainstream horticultural industry. We must make them aware of our good experiences with native plants as well as the important benefits of these plants to the community. Education is the key.

Most of what we know about natives is due to independent research by native nursery growers who learned on their own because they believed in what they were doing.

cies shall *where cost-effective and to the extent practicable,*

- use regionally native plants for landscaping;
- design, use, or promote construction practices that minimize adverse effects on the natural habitat;
- seek to prevent pollution by, among other things, reducing fertilizer and pesticide use, using integrated pest management techniques, recycling green waste, and minimizing runoff.

An interagency working group was established to develop recommendations to implement the directive and issue these by April, 1995. The memorandum also established annual awards to recognize outstanding landscaping efforts of agencies and individual employees and directed the Department of Agriculture to conduct research on the suitability, propagation, and use of native plants for landscaping.

The American Association of Nurserymen (AAN) in a May 16, 1994, memo told its members that "your business has the potential to be affected by this new policy." It stated that AAN was "working behind the scenes" to present the industry's views to key decision makers. The memo urged the horticultural industry to send op-ed columns and letters to local newspapers, to contact news directors, and offer seminars on "environmentally beneficial landscaping" that present a balanced view of the

ation of Florida Native Nurseries what they thought.

They agreed that much of the opposition represented resistance to change. Many horticulturists learned how to grow a small repertoire of conventional non-native landscape plants and are now faced with learning about an entirely new set of plants. Understanding of how these plants grow, reproduce, and how to mass produce them is still in a learning curve because the land grant colleges and research stations focused on only non-native cultivars until recently. Most of what we know about natives is due to independent

Native landscaping advocates must distribute information to make them aware of our good experiences with native plants.

research by native nursery growers who learned on their own without government grants or assistance because they believed in what they were doing. Now their work is paying off. The native growers also agreed that native plants are more in demand now than ever. Natives are selling.

Nurseryman Steve Riefler noted that many natives are much more tolerant of harsh urban conditions than are exotics. He cited palmetto, privet, and bumelia as examples. Riefler also mentioned that he per-

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