

Can't We All Just Understand?

By Andrew Thomas



Photo Courtesy of: Robert Erwin 04August2014

A hot topic in the Horticulture world today is native vs. non-native plants. When someone says 'native' they are referring to a plant that originated and still lives in a specific region. These plants may occur in small numbers, such as Oconee Bells or in larger numbers, as with Mountain Laurel. And a non-native is just the opposite; it is brought in or introduced from a different region. The controversy occurs when we evaluate what is best concerning habitat, aesthetics, and long-term sustainability.

Oconee Bell (*Shortia galacifolia*)
Photo Courtesy of: http://www.wildflower.org/gallery/result.php?id_image=41537



Some of the most beautiful places I have seen incorporated both native and non-native plants. I like the analogy "...just as America is a nation built by waves of immigrants, our natural landscape is a shifting mosaic of plant and animal life. Like humans, plants and animals travel..." (Raffels, 2011). I interned this summer at Arnold Arboretum, and the basic theme was to celebrate and display diversity in the woody plant world. I would say more than half of the collection is non-natives and it doesn't take a trained eye to realize the beauty of the plants. On the flip side of the beauty aspect is the practicality of the subject. A large number of people believe that non-natives are inherently invasive. The term invasive refers to a plant's ability to adapt and potentially take over a niche and eventually crowd out the native competition, essentially displaying weed-like behaviors.

Those who stand against non-natives seem to always jump to the extremes, "kudzu being the all-time favorite, closely followed by Japanese honeysuckle, multiflora rose and purple loosestrife. Branded as 'huns,' 'invaders' or 'monsters', these demon species are then used to tar the entire class of alien plants with guilt by association" (Pollan, 1994). There are tons of examples where this just is not true. The streets and lawns of Boston are lined with Katsuras and Cedar of Lebanon. These are wonderful plants that are not getting out of control.

Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*)
Photo Courtesy of: http://www.wildflower.org/gallery/result.php?id_image=3868



Photo Courtesy of: Robert Dowell 20May2014

Obviously there are some plants to be cautious of and closely monitor.

I would recommend that you check the USDA Invasive Plant List prior to planting anything. With some research and basic horticultural knowledge (right plant right place) one can plant just about anything that is not on the invasive species list. Make yourself knowledgeable on the subject and you will be successful.

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Sources

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