

Plugging Into the Green Economy®

Steve Castorani

North Creek Nurseries, Inc., 388 North Creek Rd., Landenberg, Pennsylvania 19350 U.S.A.

Email: steve@northcreeknurseries.com

INTRODUCTION

As you heard in the previous talk given by Dr. Doug Tallamy, native plants are the necessary link in the food chain if we expect to increase biodiversity in our landscapes. In the early 1990s, my business partner at the time, Dale Hendricks, gave a talk to the Eastern Region IPPS in Long Island entitled “New Markets for Native Plants.” At the conclusion of the presentation a member protested the idea of promoting native plants and rejected the idea that native plants should play a significant roll in nursery production. We could see that he was threatened by the idea of promoting and using native plants. He also believed it would be bad for the nursery industry and just plain bad business. I’m here today to tell you that after the last 17 or so years, the perceived threat is over. What was yesterday’s fringe is now today’s mainstream.

Propagating, growing, and marketing native plants hold great opportunities for the green industry. This quote by Dr. Tallamy in his book *Bringing Nature Home* is one we often use in our presentations: “All plants are not created equal, particularly in their ability to support wildlife... unless we restore native plants to our suburban ecosystems, the future of biodiversity in the United States is dim” (Tallamy, 2009). That statement may be true but I want to take that statement and use it to tell you that with the advent of the “Green Movement” and the “Green Economy,” there is a great probability it will spur growth for our industry. That means an increased demand for native plants and their use in solving many of our most worrisome environmental issues.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE GREEN INDUSTRY

- Suburban sprawl and uncontrolled development is not sustainable.
- Opportunities present themselves to re-vegetate with native plants combined with the removal of invasive species. All facets of our industry have to be engaged.
- This would be a benefit for nurseries as well as landscape contractors.

Just What Is a “Green Economy”? Here is a definition from Wikipedia: “Green Economy is a fast-growing new economic development model in contrast to the existing “black” economic model based on fossil fuels, such as coal, petroleum, and natural gas.” (Wikipedia, 2009). And “The Green Economy is based on the knowledge of Ecological economics and Green economics that address the interdependence of human economies and natural ecosystems and the adverse impact of human economic activities on climate and global warming” (Wikipedia, 2009). I think we can all agree that our industry has the ability to positively impact these activities.

The green economy is an emerging marketplace that seeks to optimize the synergy among three sets of values: social, environmental, and financial. This is most commonly referred to as the “triple bottom line.”

Sustainability. Now this brings us to look at sustainability. When we align the three sets of values and at the point they overlap we bring about a sustainable outcome to the problems we face.

Another way to understand this, and one I like better comes from the great Iroquois confederacy of the 11th century "*In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations*" (Fenton, 1998). The great law and the longhouse: A political history of the Iroquois Confederacy. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma). If you don't believe and practice a green philosophy you will never get your customers or clients on board. The first thing you need to do if you haven't already is to create a mission, vision, and value statement for your company or organization. It's not an easy task; it takes a lot of thoughtful soul searching. At North Creek we developed a mission statement that reflects who we are and what expectations we had for our company. In the past year we reevaluated this statement as to whether it still reflects our intentions. We found that it does. It's important to look at your mission statement often in order to keep on track.

WHO WE ARE

Our Mission: To propagate and market plants that develop the relationship between people and sustainable outdoor environments.

Our Vision: To be, in our customers judgment, a leader in the development and practice of sustainable horticultural systems, producing world class plant material.

Our Values: Working in and promoting sustainable environments while delighting our customers and providing opportunities for continuous learning.

These words hold a lot of weight with us and help guide our processes.

OUR CUSTOMERS

So now let's look at your customers. Who are your customers if you are a traditional propagator or wholesale grower?

- Other nurseries
- Re-wholesalers
- Landscape contractors
- Growers
- Retailers
- Retail mail order companies
- Homeowners

In a green economy your customers may change somewhat. They may include customer base for green nursery products

- Landscape architects
- Civil engineers
- Developers
- Municipalities
- City planners
- General contractors
- Roofing contractors
- Highway departments

- Nature centers
- Schools

In a green economy you will make connections with more customers on a local level — those that support your local economy. That doesn't mean you will lose your existing customers, but you have the ability to pull from a new client base.

At North Creek, we have been reaching out to many potential new clients to educate them about our products and related ecology. Even though they may not be direct customers they are often the specifiers that will tell others of our products and recommend us as a vendor. As an example, landscape architects and civil engineers develop plans that use our plants but are often unfamiliar with their propagation and growth habits. They work with developers and municipalities who are concerned with achieving best management practices (BMPs). Our products help them achieve this. We feel it is in our best interest to help them gain a thorough understanding of where these plants can be grown and what attributes they possess.

For this purpose, we developed a brochure for our Landscape Plug™ program, naming it “Native Plant Solutions for Ecological Landscapes.” In it we address who uses our native plugs as well as what types of projects are best suited for our plants. As a centerfold there is a guide to all the native plants we grow, the zone in which they are best adapted, hardiness zone, mature height, light requirement, bloom time, wetland status indicator zone, plus the size we grow the plant in.

Some functions that our Landscape Plugs™ program provides include:

- Constructing wetlands and upland meadows.
- Managing velocity of storm water runoff.
- Vegetating detention and retention basins.
- Establishing riparian buffers.
- Woodland and stream restoration projects.
- Restoration of highway and roadway systems.
- Erosion control and soil stabilization.
- Bio-diverse and self-sustaining wildlife habitats.
- Aesthetics: improving property values.

Landscape Plugs™ program plants are also:

- Cost effective.
- Deep rooted and establish quickly.
- Suitable for challenging sites.
- Easy to transport and install.
- Eastern U.S.A. native species and cultivars.
- Establish faster than seed mixes.

Landscape Plugs program plants are used by:

- Environmental engineers.
- Landscape architects.
- Public, corporate, and private land trusts.
- State and local municipalities.
- Transportation departments.
- Academia, public gardens, parks.
- Environmental stewardships.
- Developers.
- Landscape contractors.
- Wholesale nurseries.

In order to better understand the uses and function of our plants we set out a series of learning initiatives at the nursery. Over the past couple of years we established the following:

- 400 ft² rain gardens
- 1200 ft² bioswale planting
- 2800 ft² filter strip directed into two vegetated retention ponds
- 150 ft² live wall
- 5000 ft² upland meadow
- 200 ft² green roof
- Construction of a 14,000 ft² artificial wetland to filter nursery water runoff as part of the nurseries expansion

Besides offering storm-water management and erosion control, these working models allow our staff as well as our visiting customers the opportunity to see our plants in real functioning applications. This provides us the knowledge to develop plant lists that fit these various applications.

CHANGING THE AESTHETIC

- Traditional Landscaping and gardens add beauty and ornament to the environment — biodiversity was an afterthought
- Landscapes containing native plants have purposeful beauty by adding biodiversity and life to the gardens

Taking areas out of traditional turf grass can also be cost effective. In the *Sourcebook on Natural Landscaping for Public Officials* prepared by Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission in 2004 it states “The 10-year average maintenance costs per acre of turf grass (mowing) vs. native landscaping showed an average savings of \$3950 to \$4683 over that time period.”

WHERE ARE THE GREEN OPPORTUNITIES?

The “Greening” or should we say “Flowering” of America is taking place in every part of the nation. These initiatives are especially noticeable in cities. On a recent trip to New York I was able to visit the Highline project. It’s a 1.5 mile reclamation of an old railroad above the city’s lower west side. Native plants were predominately used in the design. The use of the space is unprecedented for a city park. The same can be said for the redevelopment of the lower West River Drive.

A recent article in the Philadelphia Inquirer reported that the city of Philadelphia has announced a \$1.6 billion plan to “transform the city over the next 20 years by embracing its storm water — instead of hustling it down sewers and into rivers as fast as possible.”

The proposal, which several experts called the nation’s most ambitious, re-imagines the city as an oasis of rain gardens, green roofs, thousands of additional trees, porous pavement, and more.

The idea now is to “peel back” the city’s concrete and asphalt and replace them with plants in rain gardens, green roofs, heavily planted curb extensions, vegetated swales in parking lots, and mini-wetlands.

Initiatives such as these are happening throughout the country. Governments are coming to the realization that the Green solution can be the less expensive solution over the long run.

Rain gardens are the other big example of native plants being used to recapture rainwater runoff. As an example Kansas City has initiated a drive to establish 10,000 rain gardens. The 10,000 Rain Gardens is a regional effort dedicated to educating citizens about how each can improve water quality and manage stormwater on personal and community property. Communities throughout the country have started similar efforts.

Along with rain gardens, communities are making efforts to vegetate wetlands, retention basins, and riparian buffers. Green roof efforts are expanding in every city as well.

As the economic stimulus takes hold there will be an immediate need for plantings that will complete the replacement of older infrastructure improvement. Municipalities and highway departments will see the majority of these funds. Reach out and make them aware that you are willing to partner with them to meet their needs.

Sustainable green development equals community involvement, reaching out to your customer locally and regionally. Make the connection.

- Promote your company.
- Be a leader in showing how you are greening your company before you try to sell “green” goods to the green marketplace.
- Have the right plants on the shelf so you can fulfill requests as they arise.

If you are in retail or sell to retail make sure you are informing and educating the public about the importance of native plants. The suburban landscape is ripe with opportunity as the gardening public is catching on to the “go native” movement.

Join green networks — educate them about uses for your products. Here are a few examples:

- Ecological Landscaping Association <www.ecolandscaping.org>
- Midwest Ecological Landscaping Association <www.melaweb.org>
- SBN Sustainable Business Network <www.sbnphiladelphia.org>
- Bioneers <www.bioneers.org>
- Wild Ones <www.for-wild.org>
- National Wildlife federation <www.nwf.org>
- Sustainable sites initiative <www.sustainablesites.org>

It’s a world of opportunity out there for the entrepreneur who continues to seek out new opportunities.

THE BENEFITS OF OUR PRODUCTS

Plants and flowers are associated with every form of marketing worldwide. Plant images sell perfumes, health, peace, renewal, joy, and environmental change.

Educate yourselves, have faith in the power of your product, and sell it to the new audiences that are invested in the green industry and a green future.

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