

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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### Who's Planting What?

*Mike Ingles*

If there's a theme or a continuity that landscape professionals find in every region of the country, it's that consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious. Designers and their clients now favor indigenous, or native, plantings, which enhance and add to local habitat and natural surroundings.

Driven by legislation and social media, customers are much more aware of their environment and the health of local ecosystems, and that means they prefer utilizing species native to their communities.

In California and the Southwest, acute water shortages drive both local and state governments. California Governor Jerry Brown has placed landmark restrictions on the amounts of water used by businesses, as well as the private sector, and the state is promoting a return to native grasses and plantings by offering tax credits for restoring natural habitats in landscapes.

Shannon Speratos, branch manager of Brightview (the joint venture of Valley Crest and Brickman, now the country's largest landscape company) in Santa Ana, California, says the industry is in "react mode."

"The governor has mandated a 25% drop in water consumption in urban areas," said Shannon. "Local restrictions are often even more stringent with limited days and times for watering lawns and plants. Consequently, we have demand for drought-tolerant varieties of succulents such as *Ceanothus concha* (California Mountain Lilac) with its white bloom growing to 4 ft."

Frosty Blue, with dark blue flowers and growing from 4 to 6 ft., is also a favorite for landscape planners, explains Shannon, as it also handles alkali soil well.



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*Pictured: Areas with drought and local water restrictions are seeing a high demand for drought-tolerant varieties or sustainable gardens.*

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Shannon offers that indigenous cacti, such as *Delosperma cooperi*, do well and add their delicate white-yellow flower to the landscape palette. Ornamental grasses—like lomandra and tulle fog—add to the ecosystem, while reed grasses—such as cattails—add texture. Purple needlegrass and other cultivars, including purple three-awn and blue grama, offer colorful borders for gardens.

“We have the high heat in summer and dry winds with the arid soil, so water evaporates quickly,” explained Shannon. “We look for succulents that hold water through long periods with little rainfall. But we are pretty much at the mercy of growers and greenhouses on types and varieties. More and more clients demand indigenous and we supply to the best of our ability and our suppliers’ availability.”

## Un-invited invasives and welcome color

Shannon says invasive species of plants may also have negative effects on the bee populations in California and growers are anxious that too few bees might lead to less pollination in farming and in landscaping, placing even more restrictions as to what plant varieties are available to designers. And that is exactly what’s happening in the eastern United States.

Ken Muellers, design manager of Ireland Gannon Associates, Inc. in East Norwich, New York, says the state is at war with invasive plants.

“The New York Department of Environmental Conservation has banned some 69 invasive plants, including industry standards like burning bush and Norway maples,” said Ken. “Plantings in the pipeline for the next year can still be purchased, but when they’re gone, they’re gone.”

New York has joined Connecticut and Massachusetts, who have similar restrictions in place, as have their Midwest counterparts Indiana, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

“It would be great to have a solid substitute for Japanese barberry, which has always been extremely popular and adds such wonderful color,” said Ken. “Some designers are looking towards highbush blueberry hedge varieties, such as Tophat, Toro and Friendship, as alternatives to burning bush and so we’ll adjust.”

Like many of the 69 plants on the banned list, Norway maples, burning bush and Japanese barberry grow quickly and birds carry their seeds to forested areas, blocking out slower-germinating native species of trees, shrubs and ferns. The message from state regulators is clear: go native. And landscape designers are seeking the best alternatives.

Ken said that, although the new regulations are uppermost on clients’ minds, he hopes nurseries will establish new cultivars of white begonias and Little Devil, along with red viburnum, as many customers request greater

varieties.

Kathy Fish, president of KFish Color in Oswego, Illinois, agrees with Ken's assessment and adds, "Along with varieties of white begonias, Midwest clients prefer the old staple of coleus. Ideally, growers are developing vegetative reproduction for coleus, leading to ease of propagation. That would be something clients would be anxious to add to their landscapes. And varieties in pink coleus would be welcomed."

Kathy adds the top annual is still the highly stout and easy-to-maintain impatiens. "Clients always return to their annual love affair with every variety of impatiens. Size variations and continuity for all species are important to planning and design, and additional varieties are always well received."

## Other trends

Unlike the West Coast, water is plentiful in the Midwest, but becoming expensive, as aging pipelines and sewage plants are redesigned and upgraded in urban areas. Chicago, for instance, has had four water rate increases in the last four years. Expensive water, not necessarily lack of resources, is prompting many designers to look again at non-invasive species of plantings and grasses to help keep the high cost of water down.

Evergreens, zinnia, marigolds, celosia and petunias are standards in most design packages this year throughout the Midwest and South, as they're drought resistant and offer plenty of color.

In the Southeast, moderate drought is driving new markets of noninvasive plants. Ornamentals such as *Magnolia virginiana* are popular with designers, and earthy bushes such as *Sambucus nigra ssp. canadensis* and *Asclepias incarnata* add beauty and exceptional habitat for butterflies. *Helianthus angustifolius* is also a popular addition to gardens and beds.

The trends in designs incorporate this eco-movement to a more natural selection of plantings. In the drought-prone areas of the Southwest and Southeast, well-manicured lawns and flowerbeds are being displaced by "meadow planting." Suburbanites with large swaths of land are planting groundcovers and wildflowers, and allowing a natural transition into the area of the home when incorporating outdoor living spaces. These designs include outdoor kitchens and recreation areas to help customers feel connected with nature and "live" in native surroundings.

In many neighborhoods, the Wabi-Sabi type of Japanese-inspired art is in vogue, like placing an old rusty bucket, antique lawn-chair or swing, etc. into the garden area and surrounding the item with annuals.

Adding vegetables to the flower garden also remains popular this season and continues to trend toward that theme of getting back to nature and natural foods. Such mixes contribute and encourage bee, bird and butterfly populations.

Whether indigenous or natural to a landscape, it still boils down to the right plant at the right place. Buddleia in red, blue and purple attract virtually every species of butterfly, as well as many additional species of insects, as they bloom all summer and into late fall, so it really becomes more about building a healthy habitat, as opposed to strictly adhering to a purely native approach.

Bees are attracted to purple colors, so lavender, alliums, buddleia and catmint are welcome additions to any garden. Tubular species, like foxgloves, honeysuckle, penstemons and snapdragons with their long openings for nectar, are especially attractive to bumblebees.

Honeybees love early plantings of bluebell, bugle, crab apple, daffodil, flowering cherry and currant. Also important are forget-me-not, hawthorn, pulmonaria, rhododendron, rosemary, thrift and viburnum.

Perennial plants that bridge the seasons—such as aquilegia, astilbe, campanula, comfrey, delphinium, everlasting sweet pea, fennel, foxglove, hardy geranium, potentilla, snapdragon, stachys, teasel, thyme and verbascum—will ensure the bees' visit is a long one.

Contractors also agree that spraying beds and gardens with pesticides is problematic. The ecosystems are dependent upon many species of insects to provide a food source for birds who do much of the transplanting and pollinating. Chances are with invasive plantings will come invasive insects. Killing off insects to protect one season of flowers is shortsighted. Alternatives, such as releasing natural pest predators and parasites, can be an effective tool for keeping gardens and beds healthy and beautiful. But most important is to return to native plantings to ensure a healthy ecosystem. **GT**

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