

Question: With the drought we have had this year I have heard a lot of talk about using native plants because they are tougher and more drought tolerant. I am planning on putting in a new landscape this fall and want to know if native plants are always the best choice?

Answer: Native plants are definitely underused but they are not a panacea for problem weather or soils. Native plants are native because they have adapted over time to very specific soil, moisture, light, and temperatures. In many cases these plants have lost (not gained as often assumed) genetic information that makes them particularly suited to specific conditions and often less suited to others. Therefore, when choosing a native plant it is at least as important to choose the right plant for the right place as it is when choosing non-native plants. I love to use native plants but I have had my share of failures.

Maybe an example would help. Let's say you decide to plant native azaleas in a heavy compacted clay soil in full sun. These plants will die quicker than most any non-natives you choose. On the other hand many non-natives have become invasive pest (think kudzu and Chinese privet) because they are extremely adaptable to a wide range of conditions. Ideally we want plants that are tough but won't become a pest. We know native plants don't have this problem but we also know of many tough heirloom plants that are good choices as well.

By the end of summer you may be wondering if having a nice landscape is even possible. Between the pests, the wildlife, the heat and the drought, it sometimes seems impossible to maintain healthy plants. Everyone wants to be sensitive to the environment and not overuse water, fertilizers and chemicals. But how can we keep plants healthy without them?

Instead of being dogmatic about choosing only native plants I prefer to think in terms designing a sustainable landscape. With that in mind let me invite everyone interested in this topic to the Birmingham Botanical Gardens on September 25 (from 9:00a.m. to 4:00p.m.) to explore many subjects relating to designing and maintaining a sustainable landscape. The conference, Sustainable Landscaping – Southern Style, will feature several presenters who can address these issues from a uniquely Southern perspective.

The keynote speakers are Bill Finch and Fred Spicer. Bill Finch is the environmental editor with the Mobile Press Register. Bill is a knowledgeable plantsman with a uniquely Southern practicality to his writing and speaking on various environmental topics. He writes a weekly news column that has been given the National Headliners Award. He and his writing staff have won numerous awards on a wide range of environmental subjects.

Fred Spicer is the executive director of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Fred is an energetic and humorous speaker with more than 25 years in practice as public garden administrator, landscape architect and nurseryman. He has appeared on Martha Stewart Living and many local TV programs. He will discuss several sustainable landscape initiatives the Birmingham Botanical Gardens has already implemented and those they

have planned for the future. In addition to giving a keynote address, Fred has agreed to guide an early morning pre-conference garden stroll. The stroll will start at 7:30 a.m. on the main concourse at the garden gate entrance and will last about one hour.

In addition to the keynote speakers, there will be four break out sessions with many topics for you to choose from. We will be talking about wildflowers, native plants and some great heirloom plants. We will also cover topics such as fire ants, termites and global warming (minus the media hype). You can see the entire program and get a registration form at this web address: www.aces.edu/~gloveta (then click on upcoming meetings). You may also call us at 205-879-6964 ext 0 and ask for a program and registration information to be mailed to you. Please pre-register by September 10 in order to have a lunch provided. The pre-registration fee will be \$20 per person including lunch and refreshments.