

OUT ON A LIMB

‘What is a native?’

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In this age of environmental correctness, the word ‘native’ has been elevated to a status of nobility. The mere discussion of the subject ranks right up there with politics and religion. Rationality is lost, the baby is thrown out with the bath water and diametrically opposed camps emerge.

So what is a Native? Native to where? Georgia, Richmond or Columbia County, North August or Aiken. A Hemlock is a native tree to Georgia but would not survive our Augusta heat. White and Slash Pines are native to Georgia but don’t do well here either. We are about as far south as you would want to go with Sugar Maples. However a good heat tolerant one was introduced by Moon’s Nursery and was named ‘Sandersville’. I wonder why? Live Oaks, Longleaf Pines, Sabal Palmettos are natives but what happens to them in north Georgia. It has always been strange to me that the Live Oak is Georgia’s state tree but does not thrive in all parts of the state. The Palmetto is the state tree of South Carolina but neither does it thrive in all parts of the state. While I’m at it, the Cherokee Rose is the Georgia state flower but it is a Japanese plant and not a native at all. In short, natives possess traits that make them uniquely adapted to local conditions surpassing many nonnatives in ruggedness and resistant to drought, insects and disease. That said they are not indestructible. Examples: The American Elm, and the American Chestnut succumbed to Dutch Elm Disease and Chestnut Blight. Oak Wilt is a disease that is a serious problem for our native oaks and could do what Dutch elm disease did to our American Elms. Native plants planted in a poor site or wrong site can still be killed as quickly as exotic species.

So for us, what is a native?

- Originates 35 miles north or south of your property.
- Within 125 miles east or west.
- Within 1000’ vertical elevation.
- Within the native range of the specie.

All four of these must apply to be a native for us. Now is that what you thought a native was?

Don’t plant a plant out of habitat. Red Maples like to be moist, Sugar Maples don’t. Live Oaks and palmettos don’t. Bald cypress is a native and is one of the most adaptable trees I know. It will grow on the highest hill or in lowest wet areas, sand or clay.

Red Maples are natives but how about the ‘Red Sunset’ or ‘October Glory’ cultivars? ‘Red Sunset’ was introduced by Schmidt Nursery in Boring Oregon and ‘October Glory’ was introduced by Princeton Nursery in Princeton New Jersey. These are what I call ‘Yankee Maples’ and over time fall apart in our heat. The specie is native but be careful of the cultivars.

What about clones of natives? Why dig up a seedling Magnolia out of the woods that may not flower for ten years and never become a full specimen when you can purchase cultivars such as Bracken Brown Beauty, D.D. Blanchard or Claudia Wannamaker that you can enjoy from the start.

Silver Maple is a native and I would not recommend it to anyone. It breaks up in storms as it is weak-wooded, has many surface roots and has poor fall color. It drops a billion seeds and I believe all germinate. This tree builds a case against ‘Plant it just because it’s a native’.

So far, I have only talked about native trees while native shrubs have not been given their rightful place in the landscape. Shrubs such as Virginia Sweetspire and its cultivars such as Henry’s Garnet, Little Henry and Merlot, Oakleaf Hydrangea, Southern Waxmyrtle, Bottlebrush Buckeye, Mountain Laurel and the native azaleas and hollies need to see more use, as long as they are planted in the right places.

I have a passion for plants and I don’t see plants with geographical boundaries as a basis for acceptance or rejection. Natives have their place and should certainly be used more but not at the expense of eliminating naturalized material or some of the reliable exotics. Plantings need to reflect the character of the site development although natives may not compliment the architectural style of the structure.