

# Time to 'go native'

*The landscape professional that knows about and offers native plants gives clients one more good reason to use that professional's services.*

By PAUL DOWLEARN

**T**he demand for "natural" landscapes is growing steadily if not rapidly. The concept behind a natural landscape is: the use of native or naturalized plants within a given ecological zone.

Since these plants are adapted to their specific ecological zones they almost always require less additional watering or chemicals. Over time they've developed defenses against insects and diseases.

While a natural landscape may be a novel idea in suburbia, it's certainly not new. The first European settlers to the United States, of course, had to rely on what they had. So, if a family wanted a tree to shade its porch, it simply selected a tree from the surrounding wood lot and moved it.

Natural landscaping, in fact, is evident at many of our favorite vacation spots. Notice when you visit a national park or, perhaps, a resort lodge or dude ranch. Plant material at these locations evoke a "sense of place" for their guests and customers. Whether these places are in the desert, mountains or prairies, the best way to convey this feeling is with the artful use of local vegetation.

#### **Who needs it?**

The most obvious people who could benefit from natural landscapes are those who own large properties. A trend that is



**Natural landscapes seem to be catching on, particularly for customers with larger properties. Incorporating adapted plants with these boulders makes a rugged but interesting vista.**

growing here in north Texas is to buy small tracts of land on which to build a home outside of the cities and towns, and gain the peace and privacy of country living. Where once a person had 5,000 to 6,000 square feet of lawn, they may find that they have 10 times that amount to mow, water and fertilize.

That's where a landscape professional that's knowledgeable about the selection and use of native and naturalized plants, including turf (in our region Buffalograss requires remarkably few inputs and makes an acceptable lawn for many home owners), can provide clients with a landscape that are both aesthetically pleasing and maintainable.

Trees are the big players in the landscape. Obviously something that gets as big as a tree had better be well adapted to local soils and climate. Check out anybody's top 10 tree list, and you'll find that at least seven will be native to the area. Trees that require a lot of care are the wrong trees for your particular area.

#### **No "perfect" plants**

This applies to shrubs and flowering plants too. The public is slowly learning that there aren't many one-size-fits-all ornamentals that can be grown over most of the country. Not without the use of extra water, fertilizer and pesticides, anyway.

Meanwhile, many good local plants are now being incorporated into landscapes,

and they're becoming available in a greater variety of color and growth characteristics.

Admittedly, not many homeowners will buy a property that has all the trees, shrubs, and flowering plants that they want already existing on the site. Most new home owners start with site that has been partially or completely cleared, perhaps bulldozed. They have to start from scratch. So how does a landscaper find the plants, or the knowledge, to advise these property owners?

Digging plants or collecting seeds from the wild is frowned on by the state. This is a job for other professionals. Fortunately, the number of native plant nurseries in many parts of the country is growing. The Native Plant Society of Texas, for example, lists 40 member nurseries, and 13 landscape architects.

#### **Local plants are best**

For a truly natural landscape, you should mainly stick with plants existing in your local area. As a rule of thumb, plants existing within a 50-mile radius of a site would be considered suitable. But, there are obvious exceptions, for instance in a mountainous area.

Because the use of natives is just now becoming popular, it is not known just how far north, south, east or west some species will go. Here in north central Texas we have listed close to 300 species from Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona that will naturalize and are aesthetically pleasing.

What about all those exotic plants we've been using all these years? A fair number of the popular species will naturalize. Exotic plants in a natural landscape should meet certain criteria.

First of all, you should not plant exotic species that are invasive. Check with local nursery operators about aggressive root systems and self-sowers. Also, in a natural land-

scape, all plants should be capable of sustaining themselves on the natural rainfall. Even so, some exotic plants are drought tolerant, and some native plants can stand a little extra water during droughts.

In 1993 Texas legislators passed a law encouraging the use of native plants and landscape water-saving techniques on state properties. Local water resource boards have followed suit with programs aimed at educating home owners and encouraging the use of drought-tolerant plants. This trend will continue as water resources become an even more critical issue.

#### **Start learning**

Whether you're a contractor, a landscape architect, or a nursery owner, gaining a knowledge of plants native to your area, and those that have become naturalized, will provide you with a slightly different offering for those clients that don't particularly want a "look" or a "theme" if it requires a lot of maintenance. This knowledge is becoming easier to acquire.

For instance, here in Texas, both the Texas Department of Agriculture and the

Texas A&M Extension have begun promoting native plants and landscape water-saving techniques. These organizations provide plant lists, seminars, and technical information. These services are free for the asking.

Other sources of information include The National Wildflower Research Center in Austin, TX, and the Native Plant Society of Texas, located in Georgetown. There is a small membership fee to join these groups. These two organizations are on the cutting edge, and their newsletters by themselves are worth the cost of the dues, not to mention the seminars, symposiums, field trips and other educational opportunities.

In the past 10 years, there have been a great many books written on this subject, and not just field guides. There are books that give good identification information and also suggestions on landscape use, including photographs and drawings. □

—Paul and Nila Dowlearn operate Wichita Valley, Your Natural Nursery, Wichita Falls, TX.



**Plants adapted to a particular region of the country have a better chance to survive the stress associated with heavily-used or otherwise hard-to-landscape areas like along this commercial site.**