Go Native!

by Rick Huffman, Upstate Chapter President

Our natural landscape has changed quite a bit from the one our ancestors and native Americans knew. Plants in those days had to be functional first — with medicines, tools and food being provided by native plants and shrubs.

Early explorers (Desoto, Bartram and Michaux), documented our native flora and gave us a reference to the South's original landscape composition. The forests were rich mosaics of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants. Open areas such as prairies and savannas provided wonderful vistas of color and diversity. Our native plants have a history to be learned and shared as part of our heritage.

Presently our landscapes resemble little of that diverse natural system. Today, the rule is fairy tale landscapes with clipped topiary of foreign species that remain chemically frozen in time — offering little diversity and ecological return.

Landscapes should reflect the heritage and culture of the region, and say something about who and where we are in the world. The ancient Greeks used a term "genius loci" meaning a "sense of place." Is our natural heritage, our unique place on this planet, present in our landscapes today? Where is our sense of place?

Designing with native plants marks a return to commonsense gardening, to landscapes that restore biodiversity. Diversity is the rule in nature. Native landscapes should resemble the natural community models. It seems logical to use plants that have evolved in the region because they are adapted to the climate and often require less maintenance.

Although most native shrubs are deciduous, they provide a lot of design options and feel-good benefits of doing something that enhances wildlife habitats. Native shrubs benefit wildlife by providing cover, food, and nesting habitat. Shrubs benefit from wildlife aiding pollination and seed dispersal.

Designing with native shrubs begins by identifying your landscape needs and by understanding a bit about the plant community type that the project's physical site conditions represent. Plant communities are groups of plant species sharing an environmental niche. The goal is to capture the essence of the community model and project that into the design. The key is matching the correct species of shrubs to the correct environmental and design niche.

The first basic questions to be addressed relate to the physical conditions of the site. What geographic area or region is the project? Is the site sunny, shady, wet, or dry? What are the soil conditions? Is the soil pH acid, alkaline, or neutral? What are the landscape needs: screening, foundation plantings, accents or perhaps erosion control? Once these parameters are decided upon, then design and plant selection can begin.

Native shrubs can fill design needs for flower, fragrance, fall color, and define spaces as outdoor rooms. The wonderful thing about designing with native shrubs is the opportunity to do something different and natural while staying within tried and true design principles. For example, instead of traditional foundation plantings, the focus should be on loose groupings of several species. This approach breaks the monotony and affords a variety of color, textures, and forms.

Some of my favorites are Inkberry holly *(Ilex glabra),* Virginia Sweetspire *(Itea virginicus),* Summer Sweet Pepperbush *(Clethra alnifolia),* and Beautyberry *(Callicarpa americana).* These are very hardy and versatile shrubs that provide a lot for the money.

In our urban landscape, there is often a need for a privacy hedge. Some great evergreen choices are Wax Myrtle *(Myrica cerifera),* Florida anise *(Illicium floridanum),* and Eastern Red Cedar *(Juniperus virginiana)* which can serve as a large shrub or small tree.

A sampling of large shrubs for shade to part shade is Oakleaf hydrangea *(Hydrangea quercifolia),* Catawba Rhododendron *(Rhododendron catawbiense),* Mountain Laurel *(Kalmia latifolia),* Possumhaw viburnum *(Viburnum nudum),* and all the native azaleas. These are just a sampling to the many choices, so investigate the options.

Native shrubs can offer new frontiers for American gardeners and return many of us to our roots. The excitement comes from breaking the landscape mold and from doing the right thing by landscaping for wildlife and enhancing our understanding and respect for nature. Happy gardening, and — *go native!!*