

SOME ASPECTS OF PROPAGATION INFLUENCING THE LANDSCAPE GARDENER

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The landscape gardener has to present to his client a complete garden capable of a continuing and lasting process. Present plant production techniques do not always provide his requirements and I am suggesting that this is because as often as not he is not concerned with individual plants but plants in number and the design reactions between those plants. The propagator is frequently very aware of the individual specialized merits of a single species or cultivar, and becomes concerned with the plant's propagation needs and subsequent sales requirements in isolation from its potential garden usage.

Such a narrow view taken to many individual plants results in a collection of specialised plants which the landscape gardener has to draw together within a scheme embodying the design elements of unity, scale, light and shade, texture and colour to create a process involving time and space division resulting in a particular style.

Style in New Zealand at present has been largely influenced by a national preoccupation with the quest for a maintenance-free garden. The nurseryman's answer has been to convince the public that a garden need consist of only trouble-free conifers and a few hardy shrubs — mostly plants easily propagated and presented for sale. Only the specialist provides the crafted plant and then at considerable cost.

This style or lack of style has resulted in a standardised garden framework throughout the country which has destroyed any regional differentiation. If one takes the view that the low maintenance garden should be largely made up of plants that thrive in the broadest sense then it will follow that any propagator will have a core of production that the landscape gardener not only endeavors to identify but also to purchase when he is to create a garden for a client. Because he is concerned with the above design elements rather than horticultural cosmetics he requires trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials and annuals.

The obvious difficulty is that he cannot get all of these plant types at any one time. Probably the biggest single gap in supply is with herbaceous perennials — at present they are offered over a limited season. Yet the perennials the landscape gardener mostly requires are those that could be offered over the greatest period. At present a delphinium cultivar with a potentially magnificent bloom and a high maintenance requirement and a limited range is

offered for a few weeks, whereas a low maintenance wide range plant such as agapanthus could be offered all year round.

Frequently it is difficult to achieve the unity of design desirable through the use of herbaceous material even when it is available because of the presentation techniques centred on self-service garden centre sales. The landscape gardener is not interested in pots and highly descriptive labels. He would be delighted to receive a bundle of rooted *Hedera* cuttings as he does his kumaras if it resulted in better economics.

The selection of material for propagation is important as not only does the landscape gardener rely on the propagator for correct identification but also for reliability of material. Obviously the propagator is responsible for such things as freedom from disease and graft compatibility but he also frequently determines the choice of cultivar to be put onto the market. For instance, a tall Michaelmas daisy with large flowers may be easy to advertise but a smaller flower on a short sturdy stem does not require staking.

The popularity of groundcover is indisputable and yet the most common material used is pebbles — surely an indictment on the plant propagator I feel this is definitely a case where traditional plant production and sales presentation have prevented optimum use of a plant form. Perhaps to lower costs, woody plants such as *Coprosma kirkii* could be grown and sold in the “Nisula Roll” with herbaceous plants, such as *Ajuga*, being grown by the square metre on polythene or in flats. I am not tendering these suggestions as positive ways to reduce costs but as illustrations of the possibilities. New planting scheme styles can only be sustained by suitable production and presentation of plant material.

After unity perhaps the most significant design element missing in our garden is scale and it is increasingly difficult to provide within the limitations of recent subdivision. There is a dearth of small trees, which has resulted in widespread dependence on only a few species, e.g. *Betula pendula* (*B. alba*) which further adds to the lack of regional character. Not only is there a need for trees to be used within these limitations but their presentation is important. It is almost impossible to get tailored trees for set purposes — so called advanced specimens are frequently only bigger plants in bigger containers. The landscape gardener requires tailored character trees, specimen trees, multitrunk trees, etc. to satisfy his client. Basic formative culture has to be purchased, not left to the client.

Annuals are an example of where economics has resulted in the declining use of a plant type. The specialised seed and cost of production has resulted in a short term crop which is contrary to the low maintenance and permanence philosophy. Yet the landscape gardener loses a basic opportunity to provide not only a

sense of time but also style if he does not use annuals. The annuals I look for are not polyploids or F₁ hybrids but those which can continue to remain as a contributing element in a continuing process. Examples are *Myosotis*, *Cerithe* and granny bonnets.

Perhaps I have not dwelt sufficiently on propagation techniques affecting the quality of plants but the purpose of my paper has been to point out the type of plant the contemporary landscape gardener is looking for. It may be that it is for the landscape gardener to identify the core group of material required for the basic unity and scale within each area and then for the propagator to produce the material in a way as to allow us to maximise the potential usage. Clients are no longer requiring collections of plants offering the challenge answered by the hobbyist but are now requiring a garden designed to support their life style at an input level monitored by that life style.