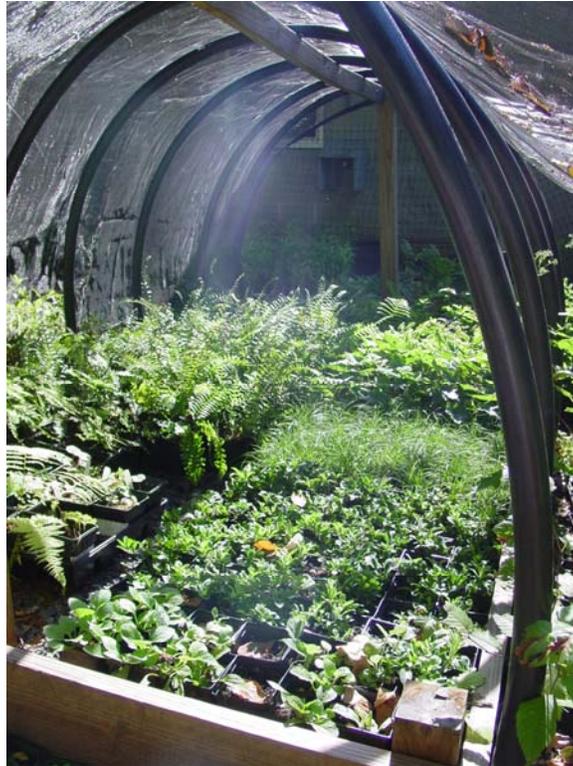


WHY LOCAL SEED SOURCES PROVIDE BETTER NATIVE PLANTS...

by Fran Lawn, Director of Land Restoration



Hoop House at the Native Plant Nursery

We are hearing more and more about how buying local goods can be better for us in terms of health and sustainability. Buying local can also be applied to plants. Let's explore why using native plants from local sources might be a better choice than purchasing plants grown from a distant, foreign seed source.

The Schuylkill Center's goal is to create a healthy landscape that supports diversity of life and is part of the ecological fabric of our larger community. So when trying to achieve a natural landscape or planting in a restored site, it seems only logical to select seeds and plants from local sources that were cultivated in similar environmental conditions as the planting site. Seeds and plant material of this nature are characterized as the "local ecotype". Following the principle of utilizing local ecotypes can be accomplished by any home owner when making landscaping decisions.

Research has found that plants of the same species growing at different locations can be quite different in their appearance, growth, and behavior. These variations have evolved over long periods of time and reflect adaptation to local conditions, such as climate, soil chemistry, and water. A plant with a local ecotype will be better suited genetically to regional growing conditions.

At the very smallest scale, the establishment of native plant species in gardens is becoming increasingly popular. Even a small plot of native wildflowers will quickly attract a variety of insects and wildlife. Properly managed, wildflowers in gardens are not only as attractive as the usual cultivated ones, but are usually of much greater value for wildlife.

Plants that are established in a well thought out planting will provide the essential building blocks upon which new areas of biological diversity can evolve - from microbes and fungi networks that are associated with plant roots and soil, to leaf and nectar feeding insects, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals.

Using plants of local ecotype in the landscape helps to preserve the genetic diversity of native species. Plants which are bred perpetually for larger flowers, stronger fall color, or specific growth habits (known as cultivated varieties or *cultivars*) lose the genetic variability that occurs naturally in plants grown from local seed. This variability is a key component of plant biodiversity, already threatened by the loss and fragmentation of habitats. The natural variations (ecotypes) found in a particular species serve as adaptations to better handle local environmental growing conditions and differ as growing conditions change across varying microclimates.

When plants of local ecotype are used, the landscape comes alive with varying shades of color, distinctive growth habits, and unique foliar patterns. In short, you have a landscape with character!

It is important to remember that the best place to buy native plants is from reputable native plant nurseries. When purchasing plants:

- Ask your plant provider whether or not the plant is from a local source.
- Avoid plant material collected from the wild or plants which are "nursery grown" in pots after being collected from the wild. Instead, plants should be "nursery propagated" from seed or cuttings, not collected from the wild.
- Try to incorporate plants grown from seed; you will be preserving the genetic diversity, all the while adding an aesthetic variation to your garden.

This year The Center will be offering a variety of plants grown from local seed sources in our native plant nursery. Mark your calendar now for our Native Plant Sale, which will be held Friday, May 2 - Sunday, May 3! Need more help with your native plant landscaping? Visit www.schuylkillcenter.org/departments/land/consulting.html or call Fran Lawn at (215) 482-7300, ext. 143 for more information about our Sustainable Landscape Consulting services.