

Introduction: What Is Local?

A few years ago, I read some reports on conservation and population genetics that led me to question whether I, as the director of a native plant nursery in a large urban area, ought to pay closer attention to the issue of localness in plants. The more I read about the issue, the more pressing it became, and the more questions I began to ask myself. In restoring and managing the fragmented natural areas of the city, what constituted “local”? How far should we travel to collect seed for our projects? Were two naturally occurring populations of a species from two different parks in the Bronx once part of the same population? Had fragmentation and physical isolation resulted in two (genetically) separate populations? Was a species population in the Bronx the same as a population on Staten Island? And if so, could they be used interchangeably? Could plants from any one source in the five boroughs of New York be used anywhere else in the city without concern?

As I amassed more questions and noticed that none of the nursery’s users was presenting me with similar concerns, it became apparent to me that there was not a great deal of awareness of these issues, and I decided to organize a one-day symposium on May 23, 2006, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City entitled “What Is Local? Genetics and Plant Selection in the Urban Context.”

I resolved to bring together some of the authors whose work had been guiding me for a day of discussion in front of a wider audience. Six speakers presented to a sold-out audience. Gerry Moore, Director of Science at Brooklyn Botanic Garden, set the context for the discussions by presenting a paper

on the changing flora of New York City. Susan Mazer of the University of California, Santa Barbara, provided the basic genetic framework for the discussion and argued for careful consideration when translocating plants to a restoration site. Arlee Montalvo from the University of California, Riverside, detailed a methodology for making appropriate plant selections. Julie Etterson from the University of Minnesota, Duluth, discussed how climate change might alter the discussion of plant translocation. Steven Handle from Rutgers University approached the day’s proceedings from the perspective of urban restoration ecology. I concluded with a brief discussion of the policy roadblocks to implementing a more advanced approach to plant procurement in the urban context.

Since then we have hoped to bring this discussion to an even larger audience. One idea to make the Power Point presentations and audiotapes of the day’s proceedings available via the Internet is in the planning stages and should be implemented in the coming months.¹ A second opportunity was presented by our symposium cosponsors at Brooklyn Botanic Garden to pursue the discussion in an issue of its online journal, *Urban Habits*, devoted to the same subject, which we present to you here.

Several things have become clear to me since our symposium. First, the issues are complex and best addressed by individual projects. Second, a great deal more needs to be learned, and answers to the simple question, “What is local?” are likely to continue to evolve through time. Third, knowledge and

experience should be shared as widely and among as many people as possible to address the issue.

Most importantly, I feel that we are asking the right question and that no matter how daunting the pursuit of the right answer, the effort will be worth it. I hope this issue of *Urban Habitats* will encourage readers to pursue their own answers to the question,

“What is local?” and broaden the dialogue, leading ultimately and, I hope rapidly, to the implementation of improved restoration practices.

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Guest Editor

¹ Readers may contact me at edward.toth@parks.nyc.gov to learn how and when to access these.