

# Going beyond sod

## *Millennials Require More From The Market*

By *Felice Lavergne*

There seems to be a growing number of millennial native plant enthusiasts in the Greater New Orleans area, noticed in part because of the recent gatherings of the Native Plant Initiative of GNO, a new native plant organization focused on increasing the use of native plants by expanding public awareness of their ecological benefits, boosting availability, and by preserving and creating native plant communities in and around our urban setting.

What draws millennials to the Native Plant Movement? Born in the 90's, I am a millennial

myself, but I wanted to get a broader perspective on this question by also talking with a few members of my cohort. My starting assumptions were that we all grew up with a solid environmental education, from Sesame Street to in-school recycling lessons, and that this base would have encouraged more of us to do or be interested in environmental work. Some of those I spoke with studied Environmental Science in college, but almost every millennial talked to expressed a deep affinity for nature going back to their childhood. It's this deep rooted respect for our natural environment alongside our despair at all of the damage it has sustained, whether

from climate change, pollution, or other human factors, that makes native plants and responsible gardening so appealing to millennials. For us, plants are less about beautification and more about habitat restoration.

Many of us entered the job market during the Recession, likely deeply burdened by student loans, and the chances of any of us 'keeping up with the Jones' were slim. Things we spend money on are less likely to be

purely for status or appearance and ideally will provide multiple benefits. There is a thriftiness and morality to this generation that requires double or triple duty from our investments. For example, getting rid of lawns in favor of indigenous plants will save money on maintenance, use less fossil fuels, and provide a habitat for birds and pollinators. We're the last generation that may not have grown up with internet and cell phones. So many species have gone extinct since we began learning about them. We've been hearing about losing football fields of coastal land since elementary school. This generation has seen rapid environmental changes and deterioration in our lifetime, leading to a more adaptable mentality and an ability to rapidly digest and adopt new ideas.

Many millennials from Louisiana cite the devastation of Hurricane Katrina as motivation for their dedication to environmental issues and the feeling of personal responsibility for ensuring our future resilience. With much future still ahead, millennials know it will take widespread action on an individual and policy level to ensure we can still live in coastal Louisiana. With such a daunting task ahead, we remind ourselves to take small steps and personal actions that can affect change. This is the space where the Native Plant Movement gains traction with millennials. It allows us to experience that moment when our native plant gardens, no matter how small, attract the butterfly we've been hoping for, or a clumsy bee. In the midst of pollinator and habitat decline, it's visible; tangible; life affirming, and attainable.

National Best Management Practices now strongly recommend the use of native plantings in green infrastructure and has become more

dominant in local project planning and implementation than ever before. The demand for specialized expertise and inventory brought by the increasing number of stormwater management projects is making a compelling business case for increased availability of plants that are well adapted to both the drought and flood conditions necessary for successful green infrastructure. Native plants are on the cutting edge of civic planning and conscientious consumerism. Millennials who are starting new businesses, nurseries, and becoming growers see native plants as a part of their triple bottom line - simultaneously seeking profits, social impact, and environmental sustainability. They expect this standard from anyone they may purchase from, as well.

For those businesses already established in the horticulture industry, millennials have a different consumer mentality. As we progress and gain more purchasing power, we're doing our research and looking for responsible businesses that provide plants that do more than look 'polished' in a landscape. We want plants that have function. We're truly searching for ways we can improve our environment with each purchase. For growers and retailers, that means incorporating more native plants and sustainably grown merchandise into your business model. Native plants are in high demand due to this new generation and the growing force of green infrastructure. The horticulture industry should take note!

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