



Turning a New Leaf Conference
Shepherdstown, West Virginia
November 16, 2013

Track A - Marketing Nature: How to Sell Conservation Landscaping

Session A.3 Non-invasive, Mostly Native, Ornamental Alternatives
John Peter Thompson, Author

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Emphasizing that it is important to understand why we continue to see non- native plants today, Mr. Thompson addressed the historical and cultural factors in the presence of Asian and other non-native plants in the U.S. He highlighted the role of the Garden of Eden narrative in our heritage which inherently informs our cultural fear of nature and a need to dominate it and that we are essentially living in a re-creation of this theme in our daily interactions with the outdoors.

This deeply embedded attitude was historically exacerbated by the concept of American Degeneracy which was put forth by Naturalist George-Louis LeClerc in the 1700's whose research produced the first understandings of ecosystems unique to geographical location. As American colonists toiled to grow familiar plants from Europe, LeClerc determined that these plants were a failure because they were not meant to be grown in the ecology of the Americas and that Europeans themselves were not meant to thrive there either. This idea only echoed the general European attitude that the colonies were a failure which in turn fueled the colonists drive to succeed in what plants they could grow.

Mr. Thompson discussed LeClerc and plant collectors such as John Bartram in the context of a shift from using plants for medicine, clothing, trade, firewood and food to using them as an expression of American colonial success in their endeavor to not only survive the America's but to conquer the ecology. This gave birth to a heightened competition with Europe in who could grow the best quality plants regardless of their usability in everyday life. The American Horticulture industry grew rapidly as did the desire for Americans to grow rare plants from Asia as well as Europe. This growing fever continued through the civil war until it began to become apparent that some of these plants with foreign origin were problematic.

Shifting from the historical perspective, Mr. Thompson discussed a few invasive plants that we currently deal with on the east coast and offered native and non-invasive substitutes for each.