

Gardens and Stream Ecology: A Case for the Exotic Plant in New Zealand

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Debate about the relative merits of native versus exotic flora in the landscape has been occurring in many countries, to the point that one author has suggested native plant enthusiasm has moved from ecological panacea to xenophobia. Much of the key landscape character in Europe is in fact based on non-indigenous flora; for example, the vines, olives and cypress, quintessential to the Tuscan landscape, are all exotic to that region. Because the flora changes are relatively recent and more noticeable in New Zealand, this debate is even more keenly argued here.

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THIS PAPER EXPLORES the possibility that, in gardens (and other landscapes), ecological outcomes-founded designs need not distinguish between native and exotic plants. Ecological outcomes are not the sole preserve of the native components of the flora; exotic plants can deliver these too.

New Zealand's nursery industry has thrived on non-indigenous flora. There is, however, evidence of a strong movement in New Zealand for the promotion of the use of native plants, and this is especially evident in discussion about riparian margins. A review of the literature produced by local authorities regarding planting strategies for riparian margins indicates that streamside planting is important to achieve specific ecological outcomes, but that native plants only should be used. The reasoning behind this strategy stems from the recognition that streams form part of the wider landscape, and plants on riparian margins inevitably move down catchments (from 'here' to 'there'), frequently establishing in areas remote to where they were initially planted. In this context, exotic plants are tied very strongly into the discourse of weeds, especially in the Auckland region where there is extensive and ongoing naturalisation of exotic plants.

While many streams in urban areas flow through public places, they also flow through private gardens. Gardens are the source of many of the weed species troubling the Auckland Regional Council. Garden plants have 'jumped the fence', and firmly established themselves 'there' in the landscape, often out-competing native plants. Riparian margins can be seen as hastening this movement, with exotic plant material sluicing down waterways, ready to establish far from the home garden. But landscapes change, and the tide of exotic plants cannot be stemmed. The question then, is not 'how do we get back what we have lost?' but 'how do we move forward from here?'. This paper offers a way forward, changing the focus from the native versus exotic debate to a focus on what plant material can offer.