

We need fair trade plants

To benefit biodiversity and horticulture, **DAVE DEMERS** argues for a fair trade system applied to plants

THE ADVENT OF the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 1992 has triggered a variety of reactions against the horticultural industry. It is time for us to stop lamenting this situation and address the CBD constructively.

While national boundaries seemingly dissolve through ease of travel and communication, the CBD has indirectly forced wild plants into an ivory tower. There is no doubting the exceptional nature of the CBD: its goals and means are legitimate, innovative and progressive, and its scope and level of subscription are remarkable.

However, our industry suffers from the regulatory changes, particularly concerning the introduction of wild plants, heralded by the CBD. As the RHS and the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens concluded last year during a jointly-held conference, 'A failure to recognize this and respond constructively will lead to stricter control of the movement of plant material as countries seek, quite understandably, to protect their resources and to gain benefits from them...'. To address this issue it is relevant to explore the idea of a fair trade label for horticultural products.

The Convention on Biological Diversity

The CBD was born at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, along with the Convention on Climate Change, and has



been signed by most countries on the planet. It is a key agreement for sustainable development that commits 'to maintaining the world's ecological underpinnings as we go about the business of economic development'. The CBD differs from other major world agreements in that it is expressed in 'overall goals rather than defined obligations' which in turn relays decision making to national level authorities. This subjectivity of interpretation, however positively empowering signatories, has complicated the concrete implementation of the CBD and set the stage for much collateral damage.

The CBD is solidly anchored on three objectives, here reviewed through the prism of our industry:

The conservation of biological diversity

The beneficial impact of horticulture on plant conservation has been voiced many

times, backed with examples and success stories. Nonetheless, this remains a lightweight argument in the public eye when compared to sensationalist stories of orchid thieves or pharmaceutical corporations marketing products based on indigenous knowledge. Our industry has, and will always have, difficulty basing its plea on this argument.

The sustainable use of its components

The total monetary value of wild-collected plants amounts to a rather small percentage for our industry. These botanical collections, however, form the basis of all collections, and research and development undertakings. It is therefore worrying to see non-institutional plant hunters having their activities restricted in pretty much every country on the planet. There is an urge to remedy this situation and viable solutions, as far as I am aware, have yet to be put forward.

Although often called for, a stronger lobby would at best notch the impressive fortress the CBD is turning out to be. We need to engage with this legal system and synchronise ourselves to its mechanics.

The fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources

While the two first objectives aim at protecting biodiversity as such, this last one empowers people to claim sovereignty over it. The idea of benefit-sharing that it builds on could be claimed as the core of the CBD. There is little doubt that 'benefit' echoes in most people's mind with 'money'. Only with this prospect of 'revenues' could the financial equation underlying conservation ventures be balanced.

Our industry should devise a voluntary world-wide system of benefit-sharing on nursery products. Funnelling funds back to countries or regions of origin, developed or not, would indirectly help meet the two first goals. By embracing the CBD, our industry would then find itself in a much better position to repair some of the 'damage' described above.

A broadened equation

We have to recognise, as the CBD is forcing us to, that all of our plants have their origins rooted in some wild place. However extensively bred and glasshouse-nurtured, they belong to areas such as the Tanzanian grassland, the Canadian Arctic or the Vietnamese temperate forest. The best breeder would never have succeeded in creating many of the highly-bred ornamental plants that adorn our gardens without the genetic riches of planet Earth.

Moreover, seen from this angle, the logic behind the enforcement of plant breeders' rights, a somewhat well-established royalty scheme, is incomplete if the natural resources involved in the process are not 'paid for' to their keepers who have a positive effect on their conservation (eg the national Forest Corporation of Chile, the Mongolian Ministry of Nature and Environment). Among the many approaches to benefit-sharing advanced for the CBD, the payment of royalties

seems to be the best and most easily applied option.

It is true that the commercial yield on new plant introductions is usually very small and hard to account for in time, an argument often used to dismiss the claim of the country or region of origin. But why would we acknowledge the value of new introductions only, a very subjective and deceiving term anyway? The old cultivar of *Hemerocallis*, however outdated, still has a pedigree based on the wildlings of central Asia. This scheme needs to be all-encompassing, if only for the sake of clarity. Royalties have to be charged both on garden selections, old and new, as well as on straight wild species.

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The fair trade label

To set the idea into motion, it is relevant to look at the organised social trend known as fair trade. Born in Europe in the 1960s, this movement is now widely recognised and trusted by millions for the environmental, social and equitable values it embodies. Its seal is mostly applied on agricultural goods - coffee being the most familiar - following a strict certification process at all links in the chain, from grower to retailer. The growth of fair trade sales is tremendous: in 2005, it was estimated at €1.1 billion worldwide, a 37% increase on 2004.

Application to horticulture

Although not stemming directly from a trading chain as such, the label being

proposed here for nursery-grown plants is close enough in its intent to be perceived by the public in the same way. Indeed, this idea of fair trade plants similarly seeks equity and contributes to sustainable development.

As part of this universal but voluntary scheme, a willing grower would obtain certification and then be expected to pay a minimal royalty on every plant sold. The sums amassed would then be gathered in one location, divided according to a pre-established formula related to the natural origins of the plants sold, and then re-directed accordingly to conservation purposes.

An international, non-partisan and not-for-profit organisation would supervise the certification and promotion process, as well as the collecting and redistribution of royalties. This is somewhat akin to the process within Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International. It is estimated that US\$20 billion in ornamental horticultural live goods are being traded each year, compared to US\$150 billion for pharmaceuticals and US\$450 billion for agricultural products. The implications of a few cents per plant are huge.

Strengthening the CBD

There are obstacles to the establishment of this scheme, but none, if we decide so, are insurmountable. The CBD is somewhat like an all-covering blanket: no-one can really escape its heavy hold but we can all work with it, adding individual thread to its fabric. A fair trade label for our plants could be one of those exceptional additions that would strengthen the whole blanket. It would be in the best interest of world biodiversity and of the world's peoples and, at the same time, in the best interest of our industry.

Why not see the CBD as a growth opportunity? Determination is all we need.

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