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Palmstead Soft Landscape Workshop**



**“What have plants ever done for us?”
Pollen and the unintended consequences**

Are we becoming more allergic to our most beautiful and modern green spaces? by Nick Coslett

There is a growing feeling that horticultural reasons alone may not result in the right plant for the right place. Once human health is factored into the picture, plant selection for both public and private spaces is clearly more complex than meets the eye.

If we look at hay fever, for instance: the prevalence of diagnosed hay fever has trebled over the last three decades and currently 50% of children under 18 in the UK have one or more allergies. Up to 78% of people with asthma also have hay fever. (source: Allergy UK)

Is it possible though to mitigate against over-exposure to pollens by judicious placement and combination of species? Garden designers Shenagh Hume and Jackie Herald certainly believe it's important to focus on this and want to encourage an approach to healthier planting design. I felt it most appropriate to give space at the workshop for this perspective as hayfever appears to be an unintended consequence of much planting design.



Following a career in medicine, treating people with severe allergy and asthma in the UK's largest allergy centre at Guy's Hospital London, Shenagh Hume qualified as a garden designer. She began to see the correlation between airborne pollen and allergies and wanted to find someone else within the design community who shared her views. After many conversations with landscape professionals that drew a bemused and sometimes negative response, she called Jackie Herald, SGD Award winning designer whose work has focused on creating healthy spaces for children's learning and play.



The duo hope to use the platform of Palmstead's soft landscape workshop on the 21st September to talk about their work together and to assemble a display of low pollen plants from the nursery's stock – including herbaceous perennials, shrubs and a tree or two – as a live discussion point and illustration of their approach to healthier planting

design. (a list of plant suggestions and planting demonstration will be available at the workshop)

As an industry we should be excited by Hume and Herald's work as it poses the question: Is it time we looked in our back yard to consider the unintended consequences of what plants are really doing for us?

Shenagh Hume advises that pollen and allergies can particularly affect the young and their academic achievement and says "The economic cost to the country is huge with lost days at school and parents taking time off work to care for their children with asthma and hay fever."

Herald says: "Allergy is a huge field. There are many different types of allergy that can be stimulated in different ways via different materials but *pollen* is the key factor which is connected to health and air quality at the moment."

Both practitioners underline the importance of understanding the difference between wind pollination and insect pollination and the allergenic difference between the two. They are also keen to encourage designers to ask more questions when specifying and sourcing plants. Herald says: "It's important to ask growers if they are propagating vegetatively, whether they are cloning, whether the plants are male or female (male plants produce more pollen), whether the plants are native or non-native. It is important that we do this as we are designing spaces and creating trends that will proliferate."

Though from a nursery point of view, the sex of plants is not always considered especially when you get to the growing and selling end of the trade. This topic opens up a whole layer of wider considerations for the plant growing and supply industry as well as the designers.

One particularly contentious tree, adored for its beauty by many landscape and garden designers, is the silver birch. Hume is worried about the proliferation of the wind pollinated birch tree in public realm design as a trend, she explains: "The birch tree, frequently used in contemporary landscape design, may look stunning in large groups but the tree produces the most potent and troublesome pollen. When inhaled, it can trigger a number of diseases including hay fever, asthma and 'birch oral allergy syndrome' - a condition linked with food allergy."



The problem is exacerbated by acres of hard landscaping in urban spaces, where inadequate permeable surfaces leave the pollen to float freely with the other particulates of everyday dust.

It is impossible to avoid all pollens as they circulate freely in the air affected by wind currents, but it is possible to avoid mass planting those species which specialist health practitioners and palynologists (palynology = study of pollen) know can provoke allergic responses.



Palmstead Nurseries have worked with Herald and Hume (above) to produce a survey 'What Have Plants Ever Done For us?' The survey takes a couple of minutes to complete:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/NS865QT>

Palmstead Soft Landscape Workshop 2016

What have plants ever done for us?

Wednesday 21st September 2016 09:00 – 16:30

Ashford International Hotel

Delegate registration on line www.palmstead.co.uk click on events.

Delegate booking fee £36 includes lunch and Vat.