

# Another Conservation Success Story...

## Fulton County, Georgia

October 2007

### 10 Years After the Olympic Games: A Look Back at the use of Native Plants in Urban Conservation

Ten years after the Olympics Games were held in Atlanta, the city has not only grown as a hub for commerce, but also as a leader in urban conservation.

In the spring of 1996, Atlanta became the first location in the nation to explore the use of native plants in an urban setting. The Atlanta native plants project (now known as the Grant Park Walking Tour) was a project of the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Georgia to reintroduce native plants to Grant Park. Thirty species of native plants were introduced for beautification and to control soil erosion in locations where vegetation was difficult to establish.

Some of the plants were tested on rocky soils that retain little moisture, while others were planted in wet, poorly drained soils. Each plant was selected for its suitability to an extreme growing condition.



The strawberry bush planted in Grant Park in 1995 is still thriving today despite the current drought conditions.

Not only were the native plants a welcome addition to Grant Park because of their natural beauty and their ability to grow on abused soil, but they came just in time for all of Atlanta's visitors to enjoy during the 1996 Olympic Games.

"The purpose of this project was to promote native plants as a way to address urban resource concerns and to beautify the city for the '96 Olympic Games," said Valerie Pickard, District Conservationist, Urban Conservation Agronomist, for this project in 1996. "In 1994, we submitted a proposal, which made its way to the Atlanta

Committee For the Olympic Games and it was approved. This project allowed us to use NRCS' Jimmy Carter Plants Materials Center as a support mechanism to assemble plant species and eight other plant materials centers and commercial sources for the actual propagation of plants."

Native plants help to preserve and improve the environment. In addition to addressing erosion issues, native plants can restore healthy conditions to wetland areas, create nesting sites, filter bacteria from ground water supplies and offer shelter to tender plants and animals. Possibly the most attractive feature of native plants as it relates to the Olympic Games project is their heartiness. Because they have genetically adapted to Georgia soils and climates, native species require little to no maintenance and are more resistant to disease.

The AmeriCorps Team assisted with locating, propagating, harvesting and planting NRCS plant materials. In all, approximately 175,000 native plants were propagated or commercially purchased for use on urban sites: 13 Atlanta city parks, including Centennial Olympic Park and other Olympic venues.

Ten years later, the plants are still thriving. "We weren't sure if the natives were going to live because of smog, pollution and no watering," said Pickard. "Just look at how they're still thriving. Not



The 1996 Olympic Games have come and gone but the remnants of the Golden St. John's Wort and the Leather Leaf Viburnum still provides protection for the land and beautification for the area along Georgia Avenue in Atlanta.

many people know that these plants can function outside of wooded areas. This project made more of a green-friendly environment for people who enjoy the urban parks." Pickard says the Olympic Games native plants project has sparked a renewed interest in native plants among urban dwellers.

"The success of the Olympic Games project has generated requests from people in urban areas, seeking information on how to incorporate backyard conservation practices at home. Despite the negative image that is often given, many people in urban areas have an interest in protecting the land, just as much as those in rural areas. Projects like this are great educational tools to teach people on a wide scale about conservation."

The Grant Park Walking tour includes a permanent exhibit in the center of Grant Park, presenting the importance of native plants and an explanation of the native plants initiative undertaken by NRCS. A walking trail and pamphlet guide is also available to provide a detailed description of the native plants along twenty-four stops.



Nearly ten years have passed and some of the USDA-NRCS Plant Evaluation signs still remain intact.

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**Fulton County Soil and Water Conservation District**

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