Leaflets News and Information for the Arborists of Michigan

BUYING LOCAL

By David L. Roberts, Ph.D, *Michigan State University Extension*

*The recent retraction of state laws that would add increased tax burdens for such service industries as landscape and fortune tellers was welcomed by most of us associated with the nursery and landscape industries. Nevertheless, our state economic woes are still very real and probably only momentarily delayed. Michigan has among the highest unemployment rate in the nation; we're currently losing about 37,000 manufacturing jobs per year. That's **PER YEAR**! On a national basis, we're losing about 425,000 manufacturing jobs per year. That's **PER YEAR**!*

Our trade deficits continue at an unprecedented rate even though there have been some recent adjustments due to devaluation of the American dollar, another major concern with long term consequences. Our trade debt is about $6 Trillion. That's with a "T." According to recent news, our national debt has doubled since 2000 and is growing at the rate of one million dollars per minute. Currently, every man, woman and child in the U.S. owes approximately $30,000 on this debt . . . and it is growing. In the 50's and 60's, the U.S. was the world's largest lender. Now, we're the world's largest debtor. We're borrowing money from other nations, particularly China and Japan, so that we can continue to purchase foreign products and live the lifestyles we believe we deserve. We're even borrowing money to prosecute the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, because we would rather have tax refunds than assume responsible tax increases that will help pay for our foreign policy activities. And there is growing concern for our future security against terrorism because our U.S. military contracts the production of more and more parts, including critical computer components, for our fighter planes, and other military hardware, manufactured outside the U.S. by foreign concerns who may not be so concerned about our security . . . and who in fact, could try to compromise our security.

Have we as Americans become greedy, ignorant, shortsighted and irresponsible?

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

There are some trends that are likely to affect our industry, initially in subtle ways and subsequently in a more aggressive manner. Global warming is a contemporary buzz word that will not likely go away anytime soon. Whether one believes in Global Warming or not, national and international concerns are dedicated to addressing what many consider to be the most serious threat affecting human kind and the earth's environment. Axillary to Global Warming and what is perceived to be its major cause is carbon pollution to such an extent that international policy is seriously attempting to dictate carbon emissions through a variety of carbon cap and exchange credits laws. In our lifestyles as Americans, we consume more energy and contribute more carbon pollution per capita than anyone else in the world *(Photo 1)*. And lest we consider carbon emission and global warming as over-blown nonsense, let's not forget that with our consumer habits over the past couple of decades, namely the increasing consumption of foreign made products, which necessitated

Photo 1: A typical scene in Europe and Asia where fuel prices have been far more expensive for decades- commuters waiting at a traffic light in Salzburg, Austria. Can Americans make similar adaptations in response to ever increasing energy costs?

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the expenditure of vast quantities of U.S. dollars overseas, we've created billions of new consumers in China, India and other countries, who will be competing (driving up prices) with us for oil reserves, other natural resources and finished products. No matter how many people hate us around the world, they want to be consumers like us and live the "American dream."

Another environmental and unintended consequence of what many perceive as an irresponsible conspicuous consumption society is the introduction of invasive pests, diseases and plants. Dutch Elm Disease and the more recently introduced Emerald Ash Borer are prime examples of environmental disasters that have forever altered the American landscape. An individual consumer may have saved a few dollars by purchasing products made in China, Japan or Germany, and/or they may feel greater personal satisfaction with what they "perceive" is a higher quality product, but that individual doesn't understand the high costs (often $1000's) either directly or indirectly in tree removals or hidden in government taxes to address these ever challenging assaults on our environment. With respect to the EAB, these costs have also been absorbed by our local nurseries by the destruction of thousands of trees to satisfy quarantine regulations.

With ever increasing trade around the world in this global economy, there seems to be no end in sight for bio-environmental disasters. In addition to detection problems, we cannot even predict which organisms will become invasive. The Emerald Ash Borer was not even on the U.S. government APHIS "watch list" because the insect was not considered a particularly important pest in Asia.

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BUYING LOCAL

"Buying local" is a new trend that is really designed toward future sustainability, an ultimate and necessary goal given economic and environmental considerations. Currently leading the buy local movement are consumers dedicated to purchasing food that has been grown within, say, 50 or 100 miles of our homes. By buying local, it is believed that the food travels far fewer miles, creating far fewer carbon emissions, and is believed to be far healthier because it is fresher and possesses fewer or no preservatives. Unfortunately, a probable stereotype of the current buy local consumer is one who makes several trips per year to the local farmers market to buy some organic tomatoes, who owns a hybrid car shipped all the way from Japan, which in reality resulted in unnecessary energy usage and carbon emissions and other pollutants in this transport, who lives in a larger than necessary house where they waste energy by leaving the lights on all night, and who justifies an extra trip to the local health food store to buy a quart of organic soy milk, because they are conserving energy with their fuel-efficient auto. Well, aren't they? In my opinion, the current buy local consumer is simply following a fashion trend. This current trendy consumer would probably not buy an American brand car made only 30 miles from their home, because it simply is no longer fashionable to own an American brand car. Fashion and our insatiable appetite for cheap goods probably represent the greatest threats to buying local if the primary aims of buying local are sustainability, reducing our dependency on foreign oil, and reducing carbon emissions, which many believe might assist in the reversal of Global Warming.

Photo 2: The author's Jeep Wagoneer served as the unofficial MSU Emerald Ash Borer "Chase Vehicle" from 2002-05. Retired after 25 years and 340,000 miles, the Jeep now serves as a shelter for homeless rodents? Who says America can't build great cars and trucks?

NURSERY AND LANDSCAPE

Obviously, by necessity, landscaping services and lawn care are already heavily involved in the "buy local" movement. Consumers cannot readily import these services from other countries or even other states. Due to labor costs and other factors, nurseries are generally more aligned with the Global Economy; more and more cuttings and container plants are produced in other states or other countries and "imported" into Michigan. Other agriculture commodities have followed this same trend; for example, in fruit production it is cheaper to have apples produced and flown in from Chile than to have apples produced here. As we know, air travel and air freight create huge carbon emissions. Even though currently economically feasible, long distance transportation of commodities will probably encounter greater scrutiny in the future as carbon emissions, other pollutants, energy usage and the importance and true costs of invasive organisms are given proper consideration.

There are a variety of other factors affecting our industry in relation to carbon emissions and global warming. For example, one lawn mower now pollutes more than 40 or 50 automobiles-so expect the tightening of costly EPA restrictions on lawn mowers, weed trimmers, edgers, backhoes and other mechanized equipment used in our industry. Along with concerns for carbon emissions, there are also increasing concerns about chemicals in our environment, especially fertilizers (nitrates, phosphorus, etc.) and pesticides; these concerns will probably initiate a whole new series of regulations that make it more difficult and expensive for our businesses to continue "business as usual." I'll attempt to address some of the concerns and some hopeful solutions in an upcoming article.

In the Michigan economic climate, which is heavily based on manufacturing jobs, I sometimes wonder if there will be sufficient customers to maintain the numbers of nursery and landscaping businesses that currently exist. Of those 37,000 manufacturing jobs lost in Michigan every year (Yes, EVERY YEAR), purportedly, every one of those manufacturing jobs supports four other jobs . . . these include fortune tellers and professionals employed in nursery and landscape. How many consumers will be able to afford our services if there are fewer and fewer good jobs and if regulations make the installation and maintenance of landscapes so costly? Wouldn't it be great if all of us would commit to buying local, supporting each other, reducing the trade deficit and national debt while helping to rebuild Michigan's economy?

What do you think? Email your thoughts to me at robertsd@msu.edu.

Note: The opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily those of Michigan State University or those of the Michigan Green Industry Association.

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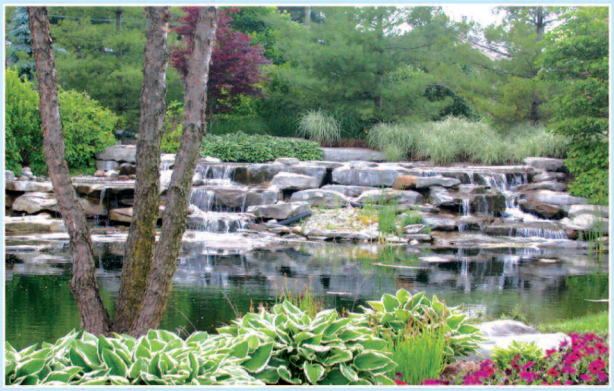

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