ABS and gardening

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Abstract

The impact of the Access and Benefit Sharing regime on gardening in the UK is discussed and suggestions are made for how this sector of horticulture may be encouraged and supported to operate within the framework of the CBD.

Keywords

Horticulture, gardening, ABS, *ex situ* conservation

Horticulture and gardening

Horticulture is a diverse area of activity embracing large-scale cultivation of horticultural crops, more akin to agriculture or forestry, to individual and amateur cultivation of plants for food or aesthetic reasons. It is the latter part, which might be referred to as small-scale specialist horticulture, or gardening, which covers the public parks and arboreta, private gardens and domestic gardening, specialist nurseries, garden centres and specialist societies. By and large it is interested in growing a wide range of different plants, often introducing new plants to cultivation, as well as specialising in growing as many kinds of certain groups of plants. There is a low financial motive and often interest in growing plants outweighs profit and, as such, represents a small part of the horticultural industry. In many ways – and traditionally – it is closest to the botanic gardens, and in the past botanic gardens have recognized the contribution of this sector in sharing plants. Indeed this used to be a two way flow. Practitioners in this sector (gardeners) have frequently been, and continue to be, experts in the cultivation and identification of the plants they specialize in.

It is important to make this distinction within horticulture as it is that interest in diversity and growing new and scarce plants which means this sector is impacted by ABS more than other parts of horticulture while their contribution to *ex situ* conservation is much greater. The low profit margin makes any prospect of financial return under Mutually Agreed Terms (MAT) arrangements impractical, although there is great potential for non-financial returns which are also proposed in the Bonn Guidelines (2002). For horticulture in general the suggestion of a fair trade scheme that would see financial benefits returned to source countries has been put forward (Demers, 2007).

The need for a continued introduction of new genetic diversity

It could be argued that with over 70,000 plants available in the UK (RHS *Plant Finder*, 2010-11) there is little need for further plants to be brought in from other parts of the world. Some would say that this continued influx represents a risk to the natural biodiversity of the recipient country although equally it could be said of the UK that the ‘natural’ habitats have been so seriously changed by human activity over the past 6,000 years, that this is nothing like the threat that invasive plants present to pristine, biodiversity-rich areas of the world. Further, as gardening and public green spaces are an important part of people’s quality of life and wellbeing, it is vital that we maintain a healthy stock of plants for horticulture through the introduction of new plants. There are at least three reasons for this:

(i) Some plants are represented in cultivation by a single genotype and are consequently prone to a loss of vitality arising from repeated vegetative propagation. To maintain them new and different genotypes need to be brought in.

(ii) As pointed out earlier, specialist gardeners often have the skills to successfully cultivate difficult or rare plants that botanic gardens have not sufficient resources for. This is an actual, and potentially greater, role for *ex situ* conservation for gardeners. This is exemplified by the work of Plant Heritage in the UK.

(iii) As we face an uncertain future with climate change, there is a need for new genotypes and plants to improve horticulture's ability to adapt to a changed climate and continue to provide a healthy green environment, especially in urban areas.

The impact of the CBD on gardening

It may be disappointing to those who look to the CBD to deliver fair and equitable benefits to realise that within horticulture, certainly in the UK but probably elsewhere also, that the CBD is either regarded with indifference or as a distinct threat (for instance see Richards, 2006). This is not universally so and indeed there is considerable sympathy for the aims and intentions of the CBD although there are some who challenge the concept of the right of governments or people to "own" natural diversity which is fundamental to the CBD (Watson, 2006). More concern exists around the perceived bureaucratic barriers or even the apparent lack in some countries of any national body to process requests to collect, therefore making it extremely difficult to operate legitimately. The introduction of Certificates of Origin as envisaged in proposals for tightening the ABS regime would only exacerbate this. Tobin *et al*. (2004) in their review of the proposed certificate of origin scheme conclude, "Furthermore any system must not be so bureaucratic or costly that the transaction costs effectively consume the potential benefits." For the gardening sector, this is an acutely relevant concern. This situation encourages continued unlicensed plant collection, creating a pool of 'illegal' plants in cultivation. It is also the case that plants have been collected after the date of coming into force of the CBD in 1993 but before the implications of the CBD were more widely understood which are, in effect, 'illegal' since they are not covered by a permit to collect. These are informally referred to as 'grey' plants.

Over the past 10 to 15 years botanic gardens have introduced strict control over plant material in their collections even, in some cases, to material that is not covered by the requirements of the CBD. For similar reasons botanic gardens often will not accept plants into their collections from horticulture due to concern that these may contravene the CBD, such as the 'grey' plants mentioned above. There is awareness of new plants coming in to cultivation but restrictive Material Transfer Agreements mean that these plants remain wholly within the botanical garden network. This has ended to a greater extent the exchange of plants between botanic gardens and horticulture in the UK.

The sense of threat or scepticism seems to have arisen from a failure of both parties to engage, or even in reality, to fully understand each other. Even for those in horticulture aware of the evolving nature of CBD find it difficult to represent their views and contribute to the process, either through the lack of a forum for this to take place, or due to a lack of resources. Not only should it be possible for, it is also desirable that gardening and horticulture work within the ABS regime. There are real opportunities for benefits in kind to be provided to source countries through capacity building and training. Indeed pilot schemes for this have been run in the UK, although these have not yet resulted in any visible flow of new plants into horticulture. These issues were highlighted in the Growing Heritage Action Plan (2007) which sets out key actions for the development of the conservation of cultivated plants in the UK.

Conclusions

In conclusion, to encourage gardening and horticulture to support and work within the CBD and specifically the ABS regime, a mechanism needs to be found for more effective engagement with the CBD process. There also needs to be a greater recognition of the

actual and potential benefits for *ex situ* conservation which gardening can provide, which should, in turn be reflected in the way the ABS regime is applied to gardening. However, gardening and horticulture need to demonstrate what they can do to return benefits to source countries and show that they respect the custodianship by those countries of their genetic diversity. Arising from this, it is hoped that a new partnership with Botanic Gardens can be developed.

References

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