Climate for Change: What Opportunities do Phenology Gardens Provide for Propagators?

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Over the past 25 years of I.P.P.S. Australian Region Meetings there has been change in the behaviour of plants. Only in a few instances have the plants been watched closely enough in all this time for anyone to notice the changes. The "first leaf date" in spring in northeastern U.S.A. has moved 14 days earlier (Schwartz, 1994). In tropical rain forests around the world the mortality of trees and their recruitment has increased (Phillips and Gentry, 1994).

Whether these changes were the result of cyclical fluctuation in climate, or were part of a long-term shift in global conditions caused by greenhouse gases, they illustrate how observations of the phenology of plant development can be used as a sensitive detector of environmental conditions.

Economic analysis can identify opportunities which contribute to remediation to climate change (Bureau of Industry Economics, 1996), but involvement of community groups in recording responses of plants to changes in weather is, intuitively, more likely to provoke a response. In Alberta, Canada, a recording scheme is well advanced (Beaubien and Johnson, 1994). In Australia, phenology gardens of clonal plants the length and breadth of the country, could engage community participation. The Australian Flora Foundation (GPO Box 205, Sydney 2001 NSW Australia) is exploring this option.

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